R. FREIERMAN

THE DINGO

SOVIET LITERATURE FOR YOUNG PEOPLE

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THE DINGO

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TRANSLATED FROM THE RUSSIAN
BY IRINA ZHELEZNOVA

EDITED BY PHYL GRIFFITH

DESIGNED BY B. MARKEVICH

Р. Фраерман

ДИКАЯ СОБАКА ДИНГО
ИЛИ
ПОВЕСТЬ О ПЕРВОЙ ЛЮБВИ

I

A fine fishing-line dipped in the water under a thick tree-root which stirred with every movement of the waves.

A young girl was fishing for trout.

She sat motionless on a large rock, the noises of the river rolling over her. The shimmering light over the water tired her eyes, and she looked down absently, glancing away sometimes to the distant mountains, whose curving shapes, overshadowed by forest, dominated the river.

The air was luminous, and the sky, imprisoned by the mountains, was like a valley lit by the gentle beams of sunset.

But it was not the sky, familiar to her from

childhood, that held her gaze. Wide-eyed, she followed the eternally flowing water, trying to imagine the unknown parts that the river had come from, the strange lands where it was going. She yearned to see new countries, a different world, inhabited by such creatures as the dingo, the wild dog of Australia. She longed to become a pilot and a singer too.

She began to sing, quietly at first, then louder.

She had a pleasant voice. But there was no one to hear her: she was quite alone. Startled by her song, a water-rat, hiding near the root, splashed into the water and swam towards a clump of rushes, dragging a green reed after it to its hole. The reed was long, and the rat struggled vainly to pull it through the thick weeds.

The girl looked pityingly at the rat and stopped singing. Then, rising, she brought in her line.

The rat nosed nervously into the rushes, and a dark, speckled trout, poised motionless in the limpid stream, leaped up and plunged into the depths.

The girl looked at the slowly sinking sun, dipping down to the spruces on the top of the mountain. It was late, but she did not hurry.

Drawing herself up lazily from the rock, she swung off at an easy pace up the path, the towering forest coming to meet her down the mountain's gently sloping side.

Boldly she entered the forest.

The murmur of the water, rushing over the river's rocky bed, died away behind her. She was swallowed up in the silence of ages.

Suddenly the silence was broken by a Pioneer bugle. Ringing shrilly over the cutting where ancient firs stood without stirring, it warned her that she must hurry.

But the girl did not quicken her steps. Rounding a small swamp bright with yellow marsh lilies, she bent down and carefully dug up some of the flowers with the roots.

She had gathered a whole armful when soft footsteps sounded behind her and someone called loudly:

"Tanya!"

She turned to see Filka, the Nanai boy, standing in the cutting by a high ant-hill, beckoning to her. She obeyed, a friendly smile lighting up her face.

On a large tree-stump at Filka's side she saw a pot filled with cowberries. Filka was whittling a fresh birch twig with a narrow hunting-knife of Yakut steel.

"Didn't you hear the bugle?" he asked her. "Not in much of a hurry, are you?"

"It's visiting day, today," she said, "but my mother couldn't come, she's at the hospital, working, so no one in camp is expecting me." And she added, smiling: "But you don't seem to be in much of a hurry yourself?"

"It's visiting day, today," he mimicked. "My father came from the pastures to see me, and I thought I'd go as far as the fir copse on the knoll to see him off."

"And did you go all that way to see him off?"

"No," Filka replied with dignity, "why should I! He's going to spend the night by the river near our camp. I bathed behind the Big Rocks and went to look for you. I heard you singing."

The girl looked at him and laughed. Filka's brown face darkened.

"Since you're in no hurry to get back," he said, "let's stay here for a bit. I've got a treat for you—ant juice."

"Another treat? I had some of your raw fish this morning."

"Fish isn't ant juice. Here, try some!" And Filka plunged his twig into the centre of the ant-hill.

Bending over it together, they waited till

the slender twig, stripped of bark, was covered with ants. Then, striking the twig lightly against a tree-trunk, Filka shook them off. Drops of formic acid stood out on the glossy wood. Filka licked the twig and held it out to Tanya.

"It's awfully good," said Tanya, catching the drops with her tongue. "I always did like ant juice."

She moved on along the path, Filka walking close beside her.

They were silent, Tanya because she was in a pensive mood and because the hushed forest invited silence, and Filka because he could think of nothing else to talk about except ant juice and that seemed hardly worth mentioning.

Without exchanging a word, they crossed the cutting and came out on the further slope of the mountain. Not far away under a cliff overhanging the river, that tirelessly bore its waters to the sea, they saw their camp, a row of large tents set up in a clearing.

They could hear a noise coming from the camp, the ringing sound of the children's voices, that to Tanya, standing far above the camp, amid the silence of the grey crags, seemed like the murmur of a distant forest.

"They must be lining up for roll-call," she said. "Don't you think you ought to get back before me, Filka? They might laugh at us for arriving together so often."

This upset Filka.

"Why did she have to say that!" he thought bitterly, and catching hold of an overhanging bush, he leapt down the cliff to the path winding so far below that Tanya caught her breath in fear.

But he landed on his feet, and Tanya started off at a run along another path that twisted between the low, crooked pines growing on the rocks.

The path brought her to a road that ran out of the forest like a river, gleaming with stones. A long bus, full of people, rushed towards her with a torrent-like roar.

The parents were returning to town.

Tanya let the bus bump past her without a glance. None of her family would be in it.

She crossed the road and ran on to the camp grounds, clearing ditches and hummocks with easy grace.

The children greeted her with loud shouts, and the flag on the flagstaff flapped a salute. She fell into line, putting her flowers on the

ground, and caught the warning glance of Kostya the Pioneer leader.

"Tanya Sabaneyeva, you should never be late for roll-call," he said, and then called: "Attention! Eyes right! Close up your ranks!"

Tanya moved her elbows slightly. "It's good to have one's friends on one's right," she was thinking, "and it's good to have them on one's left. It's good to have them on both sides."

On her right stood Filka, his face shining like a wet stone after his bathe and his tie dark with water.

"What kind of Pioneer are you, Filka," Kostya said, "if you turn your Pioneer tie into a pair of bathing-trunks every time you go for a swim! . . . Don't pretend it's not true! I know what I'm talking about. You wait, I'll have a serious talk with your father."

"Poor Filka," Tanya thought. "He's out of luck today."

She kept her head turned rigidly in his direction: firstly, because she did not want to break the rules, and, secondly, because on her left stood a chubby girl named Zhenya whom she did not like very much.

This was Tanya's fifth summer at the camp, and for the first time she did not feel the ex-

citement of earlier days. She had always loved waking at dawn in her tent, the graceful brambles dropping dew-drops to the ground. She had loved the sound of the bugle in the forest, trumpeting like an aurochs, the roll of the drum, the sour taste of "ant juice" and the singsongs round the camp-fire.

What, then, had gone wrong? Had the river, running to the sea, conjured up these strange thoughts? Tanya had watched it with a sense of vague and troubled foreboding. She could not have said why she suddenly felt a desire to be up and away, nor why it seemed so important to see the Australian dingo. Perhaps she was simply growing up.

She kept wondering about this at roll-call, and again, later that evening, as she sat over her supper in the tent canteen. Only when they had all gathered for the camp-fire which she had been asked to build (for who in her squad could do it better!) was the spell of her thoughts broken.

She went into the forest to fetch a slender birch-tree that had been uprooted by a storm and lain drying on the ground. She placed it upright in the centre of a pile of wood and lit the kindling. Filka dug a safety trench

round the leaping flames and waited till they spread to the boughs.

The birch-tree burned with a soft rustling sound and gave off no sparks. The deepening dusk hemmed it in on all sides.

Children from the other squads came to admire the fire. Kostya the Pioneer leader came too, and the doctor, and even the camp superintendent himself who told them their camp-fire was beautiful and asked why they weren't singing or playing.

After that they began to sing, one song after another.

But Tanya did not join in. With wide-open eyes she watched the fire. Like the river, it was never still, seeking always to leap higher and higher. It sang a song of its own, filling her heart with strange forebodings.

Filka, who could not bear to see Tanya sad, brought his pot of cowberries to the fire, in the hope of raising her spirits. He handed the berries round, picking out the choicest ones for Tanya. The berries were ripe and cool, and Tanya ate them with real relish. Seeing her gay again, Filka began to tell them about the ways and habits of bears. He was the son of a hunter and knew more about bears than anyone.

But Tanya interrupted him.

"I was born in these parts and I've lived here all my life," she said, "but I still can't see why everyone here talks about bears so much. . . ."

"Because there's the taiga all around, and it's full of bears," explained Zhenya, the fat girl. Zhenya had no imagination, but she could find an answer for everything.

Tanya looked at her thoughtfully and asked Filka if he could tell her anything about the dingo, the wild dog of Australia.

But Filka who knew everything there was to know about huskies had never heard of a dingo. Nor had the other children.

"Why do you want to know about the dingo, Tanya?" demanded Zhenya.

But Tanya only sighed, for there was nothing she could say in reply.

As if impelled by her soft sigh, the birch-tree, which had been burning evenly and brightly, suddenly trembled like a living thing and crashed down, crumbling to ashes as it fell. The darkness descended, swallowing up everything around them, and the children sent up a wail of protest.

All at once a voice came from the shadows, a stranger's voice:

"Ai-ai, friend, why you shout?" it said in broken Russian.

A huge dark hand carried a bundle of dry brush-wood over Filka's head and flung it into the dying fire. The darkness was shattered by leaping flames, and a myriad sparks soared upward with a dull roar, burning and flickering for a long time, like clusters of stars.

The children jumped to their feet, and a man moved up to the fire. He was short and he wore leather knee-caps and a hat of birch-bark.

"It's Filka's father, he's a hunter!" Tanya cried. "I know him well. He's spending the night near the camp."

The hunter moved up closer to Tanya, nodding his head at her and smiling. He grinned at the other children too, showing large teeth, some of which had been worn down by the long copper mouthpiece of his pipe. He held the pipe tightly in his hand; every now and then he would touch an ember to it and puff away, without a word, and the soft, peaceful sound seemed to say that no evil thoughts ever visited this man's mind. And when Kostya came up to the fire and reminded the chil-

dren that strangers were not allowed on the grounds, they sent up a howl of protest:

"It's all right, Kostya, it's Filka's father, let him sit by the fire! He's fun!"

"Oh, he's Filka's father, is he?" said Kostya. "Well, that's different. Yes, now I can see who it is. I've been wanting to talk to you, comrade hunter. About your son, Filka. He's always eating raw fish, and egging the others on to eat it, too. Tanya Sabaneyeva, for instance. And we really can't allow him to turn his Pioneer tie into a pair of swimming-trunks and go bathing near the Big Rocks. He has been strictly forbidden to do so." And with that Kostya went off to have a look at the other fires in the clearing.

The hunter had not understood all that Kostya said, but he looked respectfully after him and shook his head.

"Filka," he said, "I live in the pastures, I hunt wild animals and I pay money so that you can live in town and go to school and eat your fill. Yet you do so much evil in one day that your seniors complain. What will become of you, my son? Take this lasso, go to the forest and do not return without my reindeer. He is grazing near here. I shall spend

the night by your fire." And he held out an enormously long thong of elk skin.

Filka stood up and looked at his friends, hoping that one of them would offer to share his punishment.

Tanya felt sorry for him. He had given her raw fish and "ant juice" and, perhaps, it was because of her that he had gone to bathe by the Big Rocks.

She sprang lightly to her feet.

"I'll come with you, Filka," she said. "We'll catch the reindeer and bring him to your father."

And they ran off together into the forest.

The forest greeted them in silence. Tangled shadows lay on the moss between the spruces, and the berries on the spurge-laurel bushes gleamed in the starlight. The reindeer stood under a fir-tree, nibbling at the moss that hung from its branches. It was so tame that Filka did not need to use his lasso. Taking the bridle, Tanya drew it over the dewy grass to the edge of the forest, and Filka led it to the fire.

Seeing them, the hunter laughed and kindly offered Tanya his pipe. The children shouted with laughter.

"Pioneers don't smoke, father," said Filka sternly. "It's not allowed."

The hunter was astonished, but thinking it over, decided that it was only right and proper that his son should know things of which he himself was ignorant. For was he not going to school in town and wearing a red tie round his neck!

He laid his hand on Tanya's shoulder and sucked away at his pipe again, and the reindeer sent its warm breath in her face and rubbed its antlers against her tenderly.

Tanya sank happily to the ground by its side.

All over the clearing camp-fires were burning and children singing, and the camp doctor went up and down among them, making sure that things were as they should be.

"Surely this is better than any dingo!" Tanya said to herself.

But the river still called to her and the sound of the waves against the boulders lingered in her ears. Why did she long so passionately for something to happen, for her life to change?

II

The marsh lilies that Tanya had dug up the night before had not wilted. She had wrapped the roots in moist grass and moss and covered the stems with birch-bark, and with the flowers under her arm and a knapsack round her shoulders, she was the very picture of a traveller setting off on a long journey.

The longed-for change had come sooner than she expected. It had been decided to close the camp and take the children to town, because the night dew, the doctor said, was bad for them. Autumn had come. The summer flowers were disappearing, and for the past week the tents had been covered with dew each morning. The dew-drops clung to the leaves and blades of grass till midday, each drop as poisonous as the venom of a snake.

However, the journey before them was not a long one—just as long as the road where the bus had sped noisily past Tanya the night before. Although the road was brand-new, sweeping out of one wood and into another, it was coated with siliceous dust which rose so high that even the old fir-trees growing on the roadside could do nothing to curb it

and only waved at it helplessly with their blue paws.

Tanya took it all in as she strode behind the others in a golden halo of dust. Beside her walked Filka and his father, and, winding up the procession, the reindeer. He too disliked the dust and the noisy brass trumpets that shrilled out every half-hour, played by the camp musicians who marched behind the loaded wagons. When Red Army men passed them on tanks and greeted the children with cheers, he was startled and dragged at the reins, pulling them out of the hunter's grasp. Before they could stop him, he had plunged into the forest and vanished, pack and all, amid the tall pines.

The pack contained the children's most prized possessions, so they went back to look for the reindeer.

They found him in a grove of slender birches trembling like him with fear. It took them a long time to coax him out of the forest, and when at last they reappeared on the road there was no sound of the music, the dust had settled and the firs no longer waved their branches. The camp had moved on.

When Tanya finally got home with the knapsack round her shoulders and her plim-

solls torn by the sharp stones of the road, she found no one in. Her mother had not been able to wait any longer and had gone off to the hospital as she did every day, and Nanny had gone to the river with the washing. But the garden gate was open, and Tanya walked in.

It does not take much to satisfy a weary traveller. All you need is a cool drink of water and a rest on the grass, your hands spread out on the ground.

The grass under the fence was dying off and the night frost had shrivelled its tips, but every evening it came alive with chirring grasshoppers whose presence in town had never satisfactorily been explained. And there was water, of course, water that did not flow, for it was kept in a butt and fettered to an old sledge, and it stood there in the middle of the yard, winter and summer.

Tanya pulled out the bung and gave her flowers a drink, wetting the white moss round their roots. After that she took a drink herself and then went up to some trees growing by the porch. A massive fir and a slender birch stood quietly side by side. The fir, still in the full bloom of its beauty, threw its shadow over half the yard. But the birch was

beginning to turn yellow. Tanya touched its white, knobby trunk.

"Has autumn really come?" she asked herself.

The birch dropped a shrivelled leaf into her outstretched hands.

"Yes, it's come," she said to herself. "The irises under the window still look fresh, though. Perhaps my lilies will last for a while. But where is everybody?"

Something stirred at her feet and she heard a soft purring. She looked down. Cossack, her old cat, was there. She had brought her kittens and was putting them through their antics to please Tanya.

The duck waddled up, a worm dangling from its bill, but the kittens had grown during the summer, and even Eagle, the smallest one, was no longer afraid of ducks or worms.

A dog appeared at the gate. He had a small body and a large head and was quite old. When he saw Tanya, he paused at the gate and his bleary eyes flickered with a glimmer of shame at his being the last to learn of Tanya's arrival. His first involuntary movement was to turn back and pretend that he had not seen Tanya at all—anything can

happen in a dog's life!—and without so much as wagging his tail, he made as if to turn back to the water-butt. But all his cunning designs were shattered the moment Tanya called him:

"Tiger!"

At once the dog leaped up on his stumpy legs and rushed to snuggle against Tanya's knees. For a long time Tanya stroked his head, covered with short, wiry hair, the skin underneath knotted with old age.

Yes, though their militant names belied it, all these animals were old and weak!

Gazing fondly down at Tiger, Tanya did not hear her old nanny come in. Looking up, she saw her standing at her side. Deep wrinkles lined her face and her eyes were faded with age.

She put down her bucket of washing and bent to kiss Tanya.

"You're as black as a crow, no better than that Filka of yours," she said. "Your mother's out. She waited and waited for you, but you didn't come, and she had to go to the hospital. So you and I are left alone. Always alone, we are. Shall I light the samovar? Do you want something to eat? What they fed you on

at the camp, I don't know. Nothing to your liking, I'll be bound."

But Tanya was not hungry.

She took her knapsack inside and walked around the silent rooms, passing a finger over the books in the bookcase.

Yes, Nanny was right. Too often was Tanya left alone to do what she wanted with her time and leisure. No one but herself knew how much this freedom irked her. She had no sisters or brothers, and her mother was frequently away.

She was oppressed by a feeling at once bitter and tender that brought the tears to her eyes. Where did this feeling come from? Was it the perfume of her mother's hands and face and the scent of her clothing that had brought it on or her loving glance that she always carried in her heart? When she was younger, Tanya would burst into tears every time her mother went out, but now she only thought of her with deep tenderness.

She did not ask Nanny if her mother would be back soon. She only touched one of her mother's dresses hanging in the wardrobe, sat on her bed and then went out again into the garden. She had to do something about

the flowers that she had brought back with her from the forest.

"Autumn's here, Tanya," said Nanny. "It's no time for flowers."

"You don't call this autumn, do you? Look!" Tanya exclaimed.

Autumn, as usual, was passing over the town without fog. The neighbouring mountains were dark with evergreens, as in spring, the sun set late over the forest, and large, scentless flowers bloomed in the front gardens until late in the season.

The marsh lilies could really be expected to bloom a little longer. Even if they wilted, their roots would still remain planted in the soil. Taking a large knife, Tanya scooped out several little holes in a flower-bed, put in the lilies and tied up the stems with sticks.

Tiger went sniffing round the beds. Then, lifting his large head from the ground, he looked up at the fence. Tanya looked up too.

On the fence sat Filka. He had taken off his shoes and jacket and was wearing a singlet. He looked excited.

"Tanya," he cried, "do come to our house now! Father's given me a real dog-team for a present"

But Tanya went on digging. Her hands

were black with the earth and her face shone with sweat.

"It's not true," she said. "You're pulling my leg, Filka. He hadn't the time to do that. Why, we all arrived in town together."

"It is true," said Filka. "He brought them to town three days ago and got the landlady to keep them in a shed for me. He meant it to be a surprise, and he wants you to come and look at them."

Tanya glanced up at Filka again. It could be true. Children sometimes do get the things they dream about. From their fathers, generally. Tanya had read about it in books often enough.

She threw down her knife and went out into the street. Filka lived next door and it only took Tanya a minute to get there. Filka flung the gate wide open for her, and she saw the dogs. Filka's father was crouching beside them. He was smoking, his pipe making the same loud, rasping sound as it had done by the camp-fire in the forest. The reindeer was tied to the fence, and the dogs, dock-tailed like all true huskies, lay huddled together on the ground. Without lifting their sharp muzzles, which they stretched out on the ground, they looked fiercely at Tanya.

The hunter moved, putting himself between her and the dogs.

"They are bad-tempered dogs, little friend-a," he said.

"Worse than that old Australian dingo of yours," Filka added.

"I know what huskies are like," said Tanya, "but they're nothing like the dingo. Do harness them, please!"

The hunter was puzzled. To harness the dogs in summer seemed foolish. But when Filka too joined in the plea, he took a sledge and gear out of the shed and curtly told the dogs to get up. They got to their feet, grumbling.

Tanya admired the splendour of the harness, of cloth and leather. The white plumes on the dogs' heads waved like tufts of bearded reeds.

"It's a wonderful present," she said.

Though it came from the lips of a girl, the praise pleased the hunter, for it showed what a generous father he was.

They sat on the sledge for a while, Tanya holding the *kayur*, a long ash rod tipped with iron.

The dogs fidgeted, trying to rush ahead and draw the sledge over the bare ground.

Reaching into his sack, the hunter pro-

duced some *yukola** and threw it to them, to reward them for their zeal. Then he drew from his bosom two tiny dried smelts that sparkled in the sunlight and offered them to Tanya and Filka. Filka began chewing loudly, and Tanya, though at first she declined the treat, soon followed suit.

The hunter got ready for his journey. It was time to leave the town where the reindeer went hungry all day long.

Driving the dogs into the shed, he unharnessed them. Then he untied the reindeer and gave him some salt to lick from his hand. The packs had been ready long since.

The children followed him out into the street to say good-bye. The hunter gave Tanya first one hand and then the other, for that is how you take leave of your neighbour, and asked her to come with the dog-team and visit him after the first snow. Then he put his arm around his son's shoulders.

"Be a good hunter," he said, "and a good pupil." And remembering Kostya's complaint, he added: "And wear your tie around your neck as you have been told to do."

Yukola—dried salmon.—*Tr.*

Leading the reindeer by the bridle, he reached the bend in the road and turned round for a last look at the children. His dark face seemed to be carved out of wood, but it looked friendly even from a distance. Tanya was sorry to see him go.

"You have a good father, Filka," she said pensively.

"Yes, I love him when he doesn't beat me."

"Does he sometimes?"

"Very rarely. Only when he's drunk."

"My goodness!" said Tanya, shaking her head.

"Didn't your father ever beat you? Where is he, by the way? I've never seen him."

Tanya looked at Filka closely, searching his eyes for a trace of curiosity or ridicule. As far as she could remember, she had never mentioned her father to him. But Filka met her gaze openly, and his eyes were frank and candid.

"No," she said, "he never beat me."

"Then you must love him."

"No, I don't love him," Tanya said.

"My goodness!" Filka said, and after a moment's silence he added, touching her sleeve: "Why not?"

Tanya frowned, and at once Filka fell silent. It was as if someone had cut off his tongue. Tanya felt that never again would he venture to ask her another question.

She blushed suddenly.

"I don't really know him."

"Is he dead?"

She shook her head slowly.

"Where is he then?"

"Far, far away. Across the sea, perhaps."

"In America?"

Tanya nodded her head.

"In America! I knew it!"

Tanya moved her head slowly from right to left.

"Where is he then?"

Filka's thick lips were parted. Tanya had puzzled him.

"Do you know where Algeria and Tunisia are?" she asked him.

"Yes. In Africa. Is that where he is?"

But Tanya shook her head again sadly.

"No, Filka. Did you ever hear of a place called Maroseika?"

"Maroseika?" Filka echoed. He did not know that Maroseika was the name of a street in Moscow, but he liked the sound of

the word. "It must be a beautiful country, Maroseika."

"Yes," said Tanya softly. "That's where he is." And she vanished into her own front garden, leaving Filka alone in the street, completely bewildered.

"Maroseika," he repeated.

Perhaps it was an island whose name summer had erased from his memory? He could never remember the names of islands! He was a simple schoolboy, the son of a hunter. He had been born in the wild forest, in a tent of skins, and islands meant nothing to him.

III

The water ran out of the butt into the watering-pot with a pleasant gurgle, as though it were not a stagnant liquid in a mouldy barrel, but a tiny waterfall that had just sprung out under the rocks high up in the mountains.

Its voice was fresh and rang with gratitude to the girl who had released it with a single twist of her wrist, giving it freedom to run wherever it wished. It gurgled and hummed

and flowed in a beautiful stream, for it wanted to attract Tanya's attention.

But Tanya neither heard nor saw it. She held the wooden bung in her hand and thought about her father. Her conversation with Filka had revived disturbing memories.

It was difficult to think about a man she had never seen, of whom she knew nothing save that he was her father and lived far away somewhere, in Moscow, in Maroseika Street. It left her no choice but to think about herself. She had reached the conclusion long ago that she did not love her father, could not love him and should not love him. She knew that he had fallen in love with another woman years ago and had left her mother and herself. Perhaps he had another child by now, or even a large family. He meant nothing to her, and she wished her mother would not always insist on speaking well of him. That was pride on her part, nothing else. But Tanya had her pride too. That was why she never spoke of him, and if she had to, the pain wrung her heart.

So ran Tanya's thoughts, while the water went on trickling from the butt, and the tiny waterfall, left without surveillance, gurgled and splashed. It had filled Tanya's watering-

pot long ago and was flowing boldly over the ground. It ran up to Tanya and touched her feet, but when even this attempt to catch her attention failed, it rushed on, to the flowerbed, hissing angrily between the maze of black pebbles that covered the path.

Tanya was startled out of her reverie by a cry of impatience.

Nanny stood on the porch.

"Just look what you're doing!" she shouted. "Letting all the water run out and getting yourself wet too! You're a sight! Think of your mother! She has to pay for that water!"

Tanya looked at herself. Her hands were black, her plimsolls torn and her stockings wet.

She held up her feet to show Nanny, and the old woman stopped shouting. She dropped her hands and hurried to the well to get some fresh water.

The water was cold. Nanny stood watching while Tanya washed off the dust and dirt.

"You're growing fast, there's no denying it," the old woman grumbled. "You'll soon be fifteen. But you can't seem to settle down and be your age. You're a thinker, you are."

"What does that mean?" Tanya asked. "That I'm very clever?"

"No, not clever. More stupid than some because you think too much. Into the house with you and put on a pair of dry stockings."

She had a language of her own, this wiry old woman with the strong, gnarled hands that had so often bathed Tanya when she was a baby.

Tanya took off her shoes at the door and went in.

She warmed her feet on her mother's worn deerskin rug and thrust her hands under the pillow on her bed to warm them too. But cold as the well water had been, the sheet of paper that crackled suddenly beneath her fingers seemed even colder to Tanya.

She pulled it out from under the pillow. It was a letter, a crumpled letter with a ragged edge that looked as if it had been read over and over again.

What did it mean? Her mother never hid her correspondence under her pillow.

Tanya looked at the envelope. She knew it was from her father by the way her heart leaped, even before she had read the sender's address. He must have been afraid that the letter would not reach them for he had written

it out so carefully: "Flat 53, 40 Maroseika Street, Moscow."

Tanya put the letter on the bed and walked round the room in her bare feet. Then she replaced the letter under the pillow and walked round the room once more. After that she took the letter out again and read it.

"Dear Masha," her father said. "I have written to you several times, but I am afraid my letters have never reached you. You live so far away, you two, at the other end of the world.

"My old dream has come true at last. I have been appointed to a post in the Far East, in your town. We all are flying out there, Nadya and Kolya and I. Kolya will go to the same school as Tanya. He has already been accepted, and will be in her class. You know how precious the boy is to Nadya and me. We are taking a boat in Vladivostok, and you can expect us on the first of the month. Please explain things to Tanya for me. I am afraid I have not been good to her. Not because you and I separated and things worked out the way they did for you and Nadya and me. I can't blame myself for that. But because, although Tanya has always been very dear to me, I neglected her and seldom wrote

to her. She too wrote rarely, and even in her earliest letters, when she had just learnt to write and could just about scrawl three words on a page, I felt myself censured. She doesn't know me. The thought of how we will meet frightens me a little. She was only eight months old when you and I parted. She had such helpless little feet, with toes no bigger than peas, and her hands were tiny and pink. I remember it so well. . . ."

And Tanya remembered nothing. She looked at her bare legs, smooth-skinned and brown to the knees, and at her graceful feet with high insteps. They were such comfortable feet! She looked at her hands, with slender wrists but strong fingers. No one but her mother had ever been pleased as they grew in strength. And even a man who has planted peas by the roadside will come back to have a look at them every morning and rejoice to see the shoots sprouting.

Tanya began to cry. She cried bitterly, but after a while her tears stopped, and she felt at peace. Joy came to her as naturally as hunger or thirst. Her father was coming!

She sprang up on the bed, scattering the pillows over the floor. Then she flung herself down on her back and lay there a long time,

laughing softly and crying till she remembered suddenly that she did not love her father. Where was her pride? Was it not that boy Kolya who had robbed her of her father's love?

"I do hate them, I do," she whispered. Pain flooded her heart, flowing and ebbing like a tide.

Tanya jumped to her knees and gave the window-frame a savage push with her fist.

The window flew open, and Tanya saw Filka again, for the third time that day.

His heart, apparently, was free of the doubt and misery that filled her own.

He was sitting on a small mound of earth under the window, holding an atlas on his knees.

"There's no such country as Maroseika," he said. "There's a country called Morocco and an island called Majorca. But Maroseika—there's no such island, peninsula or continent. Why did you try to fool me?"

Tanya looked at Filka without seeing him.

"Be quiet, Filka, don't you dare say a word," she said. "It isn't as if I cared."

"Have I done something to upset you?" Filka asked.

His hands dropped when he saw the tears trembling on Tanya's lashes. He felt himself weaken. And since Filka could tell a lie just as easily as the truth, he smote the atlas with his hand and exclaimed:

"There *is* such a country as Maroseika! I know there is! This old atlas is no good. It's incomplete. I remember perfectly well the teacher telling us about Maroseika."

It was as if Tanya were hearing Filka now for the first time. His good-hearted lie restored her peace of mind.

"Now there's a true friend," she told herself. "I'll not change him for anyone. He's ready to share everything he has with me, down to the very smallest thing."

Aloud she said: "I wasn't talking about you, Filka. It was someone else, a boy named Kolya. I'm so sorry, forgive me."

She had no need to ask forgiveness. Filka had forgiven her the moment he felt a kindlier tone steal into her voice.

"Oh, if it's someone else, then you needn't care for him if you don't want to," he said. "It doesn't matter to me. But tell me, why don't you like him?"

After a pause Tanya countered with a question:

"Do you think people should have pride, Filka?"

"Of course, if you're talking about yourself and not that boy Kolya," came Filka's firm reply. "As for him, well, if ever you need a strong hand that can wield a lasso and a stick equally well, just come to me. I've learned to use both hunting in the taiga."

"But you don't know him. Why should you want to beat him?"

"I know you," said Filka.

The impulse to reply to an injury with blows instead of tears did not seem at all foolish to her but the most natural and obvious thing, and the uncertainty that had haunted her heart fled. She herself could wield a stick or fling a stone as well as anyone else and she had often brought down some quiet hazel grouse with a well-aimed shot.

But she had a change of heart almost at once.

"I'm getting very mean," she told herself.

Suddenly, Filka edged away from the window, looking in embarrassment at something over her shoulder. Squeezing the atlas to his

side with his elbow, he rushed out of the garden.

Her mother, wearing a mackintosh over her white doctor's smock, stood behind Tanya, all but brushing her shoulders. She had come in without a sound.

Tanya could not collect herself for a second or two and stared at her fixedly. Her mother seemed to her to be different from her usual self. Rather like an object that is brought up very close to one's eyes and suddenly loses its familiar shape. She saw the two barely visible lines running from the corners of her nose, the slender feet in shoes that were too large for them—her mother had never learned to look after herself—and the thin, delicate hands that tended the sick so carefully. Only her mother's gaze was unchanged. It was as Tanya had always known it. Her mother's grey eyes looked at her, and Tanya's pain dissolved in them like a pinch of salt thrown into the sea. Gently, she kissed her mother, shrinking from touching her eyes as if fearing to cloud their brightness.

"Mother!" she said.

Her mother held her close.

"I hurried home as soon as I could," she said. "I've missed you, darling."

She gave Tanya a long, searching look. Her glance strayed from her hair which the sun had bleached to her face which was hot and glowing with sun-tan.

"The camp has done her good," her mother thought.

Then she looked at Tanya's feet and was surprised to see that she was barefoot. Only then did she notice the disorder in the room: the pillows scattered over the floor, the crumpled bed and the letter lying on it without its envelope.

The light in her eyes that Tanya had feared to obscure with her caress died out by itself, as if quenched by a sudden gust of wind. Her gaze expressed anxiety, confusion, alarm and what Tanya could only define to herself as an attempt at dissemblance. Why then would her mother take so long about lifting the pillows from the floor and arranging the bed?

"Have you read it, Tanya?" her mother asked her softly.

Tanya silently dropped her head.

"You ought to be glad, Tanya."

Tanya said nothing.

Her mother waited patiently.

"Mother, is that boy my brother?" Tanya asked.

"No," her mother replied, "he's no relation. He's Nadya's, Nadezhda Petrovna's, nephew. But they brought him up, and your father loves him and feels sorry for him because he has no parents. Your father is a very kind man. I always told you so."

"Then he's a stranger, he's not even my brother," said Tanya, her head sinking lower.

Gently, her mother tilted up Tanya's chin and kissed her once, and then again.

"Tanya, my own darling, we'll talk it all over, you and I. You'll go to the quay to meet them, and you'll see for yourself. Your father will be pleased. You will go, won't you?"

"And you, Mother?"

But her mother averted her gaze.

"No, Tanya, I can't. You know how busy I am."

As she turned away, she felt Tanya snuggle against her, felt the tight pressure of the girl's body against her own.

"Mother, you're the only person I love. I'll always stay with you. I don't want anyone else, not ever. And I won't go to meet them."

IV

Amazingly, the flowers that Tanya had planted were still alive on the morning her father was due to arrive.

Whether this was because the angry little stream that had gushed out of the water-butt had given them all they needed to drink, or simply because, like many scentless northern flowers, they were hardy and clung to life, Tanya never knew. But when she went to look at them, there they were, standing up straight on their long stalks.

She decided not to give them to anyone, chased away a duck that was nestling on the flower-bed and glanced up to look at the wooden watch-tower that dominated the northern town where forest birds sang in the front gardens at dawn. No flag was flying over the tower, and this meant that no boat had been sighted. Was the boat late then? But what did Tanya care about flag or boat! She did not intend to go to the quay. What if she *had* tied a ribbon in her hair and put on her best frock. It was the first day of school, a gala occasion for everyone! But school did not begin for many hours. Why then had she got up so early?

"I can't sleep!" was what she would have said had the creaking door wakened her mother. "What can I do if I can't sleep today!"

Would the boat arrive at all? Or was it a phantom vessel for which neither time nor place existed, which perhaps even now was sailing on another river with the fog of other skies stretching around it?

The garden was foggy too. The boughs of the birch glistened with dew and its trunk was moist—the tree had not yet wakened from its sleep.

It was early in the morning, but already footsteps could be heard in the street, trampling on the grass and stamping over the ground. Someone was hurrying down to the quay. Was it a brother going to meet his sister, a father impatient to embrace his son or a fisherman hoping for news? Or was it Filka, eager to fish for ruffs for the last time before school?

Tanya sat down by the gate and listened, keeping a careful watch, while the drowsy grass under her feet and the dreamy branches over her head slumbered peacefully.

After a time, a fog-horn blew, so faint that only the expectant heart could hear it. It was

the boat blowing its fog-horn by the light house beyond Chorny Cape.

Tanya opened the gate and went out into the street, but she came back into the garden again a moment later and stood quietly over the flowers. Perhaps she should pick them while they were still fresh and would please her father? After all, they were all she had. And bending down, she picked the marsh lilies and the irises which she had grown with such care. Then she called Tiger who followed her eagerly into the street.

The town was still half-asleep. Only the watch-tower was awake, as usual. Its tiny door, looking like a loop-hole, was open to the wind. The flag had been hoisted and fluttered in the breeze, stretching out towards the river.

The few passers-by that Tanya met were all hurrying to the quay.

Tanya paused on the top of the slope for a moment and looked down at the river. How clear and bright it looked in its frame of dark, tree-covered mountains! And how big! Even the shadows cast by the mountains could not cover it completely. It was down this river that Tanya longed to sail for distant shores where the wild dingo lived!

The boat steamed in to dock. Dark and massive as a cliff, its roar swaying the cedars on the mountains, it looked only a speck on the great river, almost lost in the bright, watery plains.

Tanya rushed headlong down the slope. The boat was coming into its berth, lurching lightly against the crowded quay where barrels lay about like pieces left on the board after giants had played a game of lotto.

People at the rail were waving handkerchiefs. Was someone waving to her? Tanya paled. Lifting her hand with effort, she forced herself to wave back. Oh, but it was absurd! How could she expect to recognize her father in this crowd when she had never seen him in her life! And how could he recognize her? She had run to the quay without giving this a thought. Why had she given in to the impulse, to the prompting of her unreasoning heart? It was pounding so hard now, her heart, it could not decide what it should do—stop beating altogether or beat faster and faster.

Clutching her flowers, Tanya stood wretchedly beside the barrels on the pier, while Tiger licked her feet, powerless to help her. People streamed past her. Perhaps those

three were they, the man in the shiny felt hat, the oldish woman and the tall, skinny boy who was just repulsive enough to be the unknown Kolya. But no, they went past her without a glance, obviously expecting no one to meet them.

Or were those the ones—there were three of them too—a fat man in a thick cloth cap, a young and rather plain woman and a boy, fat like the man and even more repulsive than the skinny one?

Yes, it must be they, thought Tanya.

She stepped forward. But the man looked at her coolly and the fat boy pointed to her flowers and asked: "Are you selling them?"

Trembling with resentment, Tanya moved away. She hid behind the barrels and stood there to the end till the quay had emptied and the boards no longer rang with footsteps. What was she waiting for? They simply had not come.

Tanya emerged from behind the barrels. The crew had already gone off to town. Ambulance men passed her with a stretcher. They were the last to leave, and she went with them. A boy lay on the stretcher, his legs covered with a woollen blanket. His face was flushed and feverish, but he was not

unconscious, and fearing to fall off the stretcher, he gripped the sides tightly, an embarrassed smile on his lips.

"What's the matter with him?" Tanya asked one of the ambulance men.

"He fell ill on board. Malaria," the man told her briefly.

Seeing Tanya walking beside them, the boy fought down his fear and, stretching himself out flat, looked at her fixedly with his feverish eyes.

"You've been crying, haven't you?" he asked her suddenly.

Tanya covered her mouth with her flowers, pressing them close as if to smell a fragrance they did not give out. But what could this sick boy know of northern flowers?

"You've been crying," he repeated firmly.

"Oh, no, no! What makes you think that?" said Tanya, putting her flowers beside him on the litter. "I wasn't crying. It's just that someone, a fat boy, threw some sand in my eyes."

And the man who ran down the gangway to the landing-stage last, saw no one there but a lonely young girl climbing sadly up the mountain side.

V

The first day at school, a happy one for her schoolmates, was a hard day for Tanya. She came into the much trampled school yard alone, after the bell had rung. She pushed open the heavy door, but the corridor, like the yard outside, was empty and quiet. Was she late?

"No," the watchman told her, "the teachers have not gone into the class-rooms yet, but you'd better hurry."

She had not the strength to run. Slowly, as though climbing a steep hill, she went down the long, polished corridor. The walls over her head were hung with placards, and the sun, bursting in through the ten huge windows, picked out every letter with its searching rays:

"WELCOME TO SCHOOL! THE NEW SCHOOL YEAR IS BEGINNING! STUDY HARD AND DO YOUR BEST!"

A little girl with thin plaits that curled at the ends pranced by, turning round to stick out her tongue at Tanya.

"*Ich bin, du bist, er ist!*" she shouted in German.

What quick, slender legs this tiny girl had! She was Tanya all over again, little Tanya sticking out her tongue at her own self!

But the little girl vanished round the corner, and Tanya stopped at the door of her new class-room.

The door was closed, muffling the hubbub inside.

The noise, as comforting as the rush of a river and the rustling of trees, sounds that she had learned to love from her earliest years, helped her to collect her thoughts.

As if making up a quarrel with herself, she said: "Oh, all right, let's forget it," and flung the door open.

A clamour rose at her entrance.

She smiled with pleasure. She felt like someone who has come in out of the frost and, his sight temporarily blurred by the cold, so that he is unable to see the faces and objects clearly, smiles at the warmth and the words which have not yet been said, but which, he knows, will be friendly.

"Tanya, come over here. Sit with us, Tanya!" her classmates shouted.

And Filka did a handstand on his desk.

But though no boy could have done it more expertly, he looked sad.

Tanya went on smiling. She decided to sit beside Zhenya and had just slipped into place. Filka seating himself at the desk behind her, when Alexandra Ivanovna, the Russian teacher, entered.

She walked on to the dais, but stepped down again at once, telling herself: "If four painted boards can raise one person above others, then this world of ours is indeed worth little."

Going round the dais, she went nearer her pupils so that no barriers separated them apart from her own and their personal shortcomings.

She was young, her skin glowed and her gaze was clear and calm and compelled the attention of even the most mischievous boys in class. On her black dress shone a tiny star of Ural stone. Oddly enough, the children never mistook the teacher's fresh youthfulness for the raw inexperience they would have been only too glad to ridicule. They never laughed at Alexandra Ivanovna.

"Children!" she said, trying out her deep voice after the long summer interval. It was as compelling as her gaze.

"Children!" she repeated. "Today is a great occasion for all of us, for we begin our school year. I am pleased to be with you again, to be your form mistress as I have been for several years running. You have all grown up during these years, and I have got a little older. But we have always striven to do our best, and...."

She would certainly have gone on to say all that is supposed to be said to children at the beginning of a new term had not two boys, two new pupils, come in at that moment. They were the same boys Tanya had seen on the quay earlier in the day. One of them was tall and skinny, and the other short and fat, with round cheeks that gave him a roguish look.

The class eyed the new arrivals with curiosity, but none of the forty boys and girls, fidgeting in their seats, shared Tanya's sense of expectancy. She would learn now which of the two had caused her misery that was greater than fear. One of them was sure to be Kolya.

Alexandra Ivanovna asked the boys their names.

"Godilo-Godlevsky," said the fat boy.

"Borshch," said the skinny boy.

"Then 'they haven't come after all," thought Tanya, relieved, and once more she told herself: "All right let's forget it for now."

The laughter that rang out in class when the new boys had said their odd names, boded no good for a beginning, but Alexandra Ivanovna said:

"And now let's get down to work, children. I hope you haven't forgotten during the summer everything you learned."

Filka sighed loudly.

Alexandra Ivanovna held his eye for a moment, but her gaze was not stern. She could afford to be lenient this time. Today was the children's day, and she wanted them to feel at home.

"Why did you sigh, Filka?" she asked him.

Filka rose from his bench.

"I got up at dawn today," he said, "to write a letter to my friend, but I had to put it aside because I forgot how to punctuate the sentence 'Where were you going so early this morning, my dear friend?' "

"It's a pity you forgot," said Alexandra Ivanovna, glancing questioningly at Tanya.

But Tanya sat with downcast eyes, and thinking that she did not want to answer, the teacher added:

"Tanya Sabaneyeva, I hope you haven't forgotten how to punctuate a sentence like that. Tell us the rule, please."

"What's it all about?" Tanya thought. "He was talking about me. Why should everyone be so cruel! Why should even Filka remind me of the things I'm trying so hard to forget!"

Aloud she said:

"A sentence containing an address calls for a comma or an exclamation mark."

"You see," Alexandra Ivanovna said to Filka, "Tanya remembers the rule very well. Please write an example of a sentence like this on the blackboard."

Filka went to the blackboard and took up the piece of chalk.

Tanya still sat with downcast eyes, her hand hiding part of her face. But even so, Filka thought she looked unhappy, and he desperately hoped that his little joke had had nothing to do with it.

"What's the matter with her?" he asked himself. And he scribbled on the board: "Cheer up, frend!"

The teacher lifted her hands in dismay.

"Oh, Filka, Filka," she said reproachfully, "you've forgotten everything, absolutely everything. What's the good of getting the comma right if you go and spell the word 'friend' without an 'i'!"

"Well, it's a verb, isn't it!" said Filka, unabashed.

"A verb! Of all things! Why a verb?" the teacher exclaimed.

"I just know it is," Filka stubbornly persisted. "Friend. What are you doing, friend? See—there's your action."

At the burst of laughter that followed Tanya raised her head. And when Filka looked at her again, she was laughing, in that sweet way of hers, louder than anyone.

Filka chuckled and wiped the chalk off his fingers.

He was pleased.

Alexandra Ivanovna, leaning lightly against the wall, watched him in bewilderment.

How could this witty and resourceful boy be so pleased at a flagrant mistake! There must be something behind it. The children were keeping something from her. And she had thought that she knew them so well!

VI

The rare moments when her mother came out into the garden after work and sat on the grass by the flower-beds were happy ones for Tanya.

Though the autumn grass was poor and the flower-beds bare, it was wonderful all the same! Tanya would lie down beside her mother, putting her head in her lap, and then the grass at once seemed splendid and the sky looked very bright. They would lie there a long time, gazing in silence at the sky, where the eagles soared to dizzy heights over the estuary, watching for fish. The eagles poised motionless, only moving when a passing plane disturbed them. The distant roar of the plane, muffled by forest, was barely audible in the garden. Listening to it die out abruptly or fade slowly over their heads like a strange cloud, mother and daughter would usually remain silent.

But today, listening to the faint sound, Tanya's mother said:

"So they haven't come. What a long way lies between us!"

Tanya said nothing.

Her mother pointed to the flower-bed where nothing but a few roots remained.

"What's happened to the irises?" she asked. "Your little flower-bed was so lovely. Did that glutton of a duck peck them all away?"

"I chased it off myself this morning," said Tanya, without moving.

"Marsh lilies don't grow near Moscow," the mother went on, "and your father used to love them. I hoped you would be able to give him a bunch."

Tanya was silent, and her mother added: "He's a kind man."

Tanya rose abruptly, but sank down again at once, laying her head back on her mother's lap.

"What were you going to say?" her mother asked.

"If he's so kind, why did he leave us?"

Her mother stirred, moving away as if her elbow had accidentally touched a sharp stone. Tanya, sensing the cruelty of what she had said, jumped to her knees and covered her mother's dress, face and hands with kisses.

How happy and peaceful they had been, lying silently on the bare grass in their little garden, with nothing overhead but the sky! How could she love her father if the very

mention of him had robbed them of their happy mood!

"Mother, I won't do it again," said Tanya, "not ever. I'm so glad they didn't come! We're happy together, aren't we? And it doesn't matter about the flowers. I'll plant new ones. I know a swamp in the forest where they grow, and I'll get some seeds and our garden will look nicer than ever, much nicer."

She rattled on, hardly knowing what she was saying, and at first she did not hear the click of the latch on the gate or her mother asking her to open it.

"Do go, Tanya," said her mother for the third time. "Someone's trying to get in. Perhaps they need me at the hospital."

Tanya rose to her feet finally and hearing someone's footsteps outside the fence she hurried to the gate. She hated to open it even to patients, and called out crossly:

"What do you want? Is it for the doctor? Are you a patient?"

But there facing her stood a tall, robust, healthy-looking man in a colonel's greatcoat and top-boots. He looked at her with a gay smile, saying nothing. How oddly he behaved!

Suddenly, behind her, she heard her mother

give a faint cry. She half closed her eyes and stepped back against the gate.

Her father! It was her father!

He stepped over a board lying on the ground and moved forward a little, as if he were about to bend over her mother and kiss her. But her mother drew back and merely held out her hand to him. He took it humbly and held it between his own. With her free hand her mother pointed to Tanya. So swiftly that his leather belt and straps squeaked, he turned and stretched out his big hands to Tanya who stepped toward him. She was pale and looked frightened. Holding her close to him, he showered kisses on her forehead. He smelt of cloth and leather.

"How you've grown up," he said. "I should have brought you flowers, but I brought sweets instead."

He reached into his pocket for the box, but it was too large for the pocket and had got caught in the lining, so that he had to tear, pull and push to extricate it. His face flushed with the effort and he murmured something. Tanya waited, becoming paler every minute. And watching his face, covered like a baby's with tiny drops of perspiration, she wondered if he was a kind man or not.

Finally he got the box out and offered it to her. She took it, but not knowing what to do with it, put it on the old sled beside the water-butt. In the ensuing silence, the drops of water dripping on to the box sounded like thunderclaps. Then Tiger appeared and Cossack and her family and they all began sniffing at the box.

Tanya's mother shook her head. She looked at the box thoughtfully and carried it into the house.

Tanya stayed in the garden, and her father put his arms around her again and kissed her.

Now that his struggle with the box of sweets was over, he began to speak. He was excited and spoke very loudly, the smile on his face strained and tense.

"It's a pity you weren't at the quay. Nadya and I were hoping to see you. We were held up on board. Kolya went down with malaria and we had to wait for the ambulance men to get him ashore. And, would you believe it, some girl on the quay gave him a bunch of flowers. Marsh lilies. Years since I'd seen them. She put them on his stretcher. He hoped she would turn out to be you! But you weren't there."

Tanya lifted her hand to her temple and pressed it hard as if trying to stop the surging blood from flooding her face. She drew back a little.

"What's the matter, Tanya?" her father asked her.

"Don't speak so loudly, Father," she said, "I can hear you quite well."

The silence that suddenly enveloped the garden overwhelmed her. Her father stopped talking abruptly. A stern look came over his flushed face. The smile left his lips. But his eyes were as kind as before. He coughed, and the cough seemed strangely familiar to Tanya. She too coughed in that jerky, violent way whenever sadness enveloped her like a sudden blast of cold air.

Her father looked at her fixedly and squeezed her shoulder.

"I know that you have a grudge against me, Tanya," he said, "but we'll be friends all the same, won't we?"

"Perhaps you would care for some tea?" said Tanya, in her most formal voice.

"Oh, so that's the kind of girl I have!" her father said softly, squeezing her shoulder again.

She understood the reproach and said more kindly:

"Come and have tea with us, Daddy." She felt her eyes smart with stinging tears, and added: "I'm not used to you yet, you know, Daddy."

He took his hand off her shoulder and passed it over her cheek.

"Yes, you're right," he said in a barely audible voice. "These things come hard when one's fifteen, my dear. Very hard. But we'll be friends just the same. And now let's go have our tea."

And for the first time, unfamiliar footsteps sounded on the low wooden porch of Tanya's house, the heavy footsteps of a man, of her father.

VII

When her school friends asked Tanya whether Kolya Sabaneyev who joined her class was a relation of hers, a cousin, perhaps, she said "Yes" to some and "No" to others, and since no one was really very interested, anyway, the questions soon stopped altogether. And Filka, who had spent so much

time trying to find a country called Maroseika, refrained from asking her anything.

But he sat just behind Tanya in class and could watch the back of her head as much as he pleased. Even the back of a person's head can tell much to a careful observer. It can be as cold and hard as the rock Filka used to light a fire in the forest; and it can be as tender and gentle as a lonely blade of grass.

The back of Tanya's head was this and it was that, but it mostly expressed her main concern not to think about what went on at the desk behind her where Filka and Kolya sat.

Which of the two was the target of Tanya's slight, intentional or not?

Since Filka always preferred to look on the good side of things, he decided that it certainly could not be meant for him. On the other hand, he had to admit that it had been unfair of Tanya to call Kolya proud. He was, perhaps, rather delicate. His hands were too thin and his face was too pale, but he was certainly not proud.

When Filka had showed him the so-called "brimstone" that they all chewed at school, Kolya had asked what it was.

"That's fir resin," Filka had explained. "You can get some from the Chinese who sells 'stickies' on the corner. He'll let you have a big piece for fifty kopeks."

"What are 'strickies'?" Kolya had asked.

"Whoa, brother!" Filka had said, annoyed. "You want to know everything at once."

But Kolya had shown no resentment at Filka's tone.

"Very well," he had replied, "I'll find out later. But you chaps are a bit queer. I've never seen anyone chewing resin before."

Nevertheless, he had bought a large supply and was soon chewing away, making the same loud, snapping noise with his teeth as the others.

He had treated Filka to some and Tanya too. Admitting to herself that he was generous, the girl had forced herself to smile at him, showing her teeth which were as white and sparkling as snow.

"It must be thanks to the resin that you all have such white teeth here," he had said. "I suppose it cleans them. It's wonderful!"

She had been revolted.

"It would be wonderful if you left me alone!" she had said.

He had smiled, but made no immediate retort, looking at her with eyes that were as light and transparent as ice, and she had seen the obstinacy in them.

"Yes, it is wonderful, the resin, I mean," he had repeated calmly.

Whether this had been a real quarrel, Tanya had been unable to decide, but their enmity dated back to that moment, and this sickly boy was constantly cropping up in her mind.

On Sundays, Tanya had dinner at her father's.

She would start out from the wood behind her house and come out on the road to the fort. This road twisted along the river-bank, turning now right, now left, as if to dart a quick look at the river that wound below, pushing the mountains aside.

Tanya walked slowly, following the turns of the road to gaze at the river. On quiet days she could hear the hiss with which clods of clay crumbled from the bank and slid into the water.

Tiger too would cock an ear to listen. He followed Tanya everywhere.

In half an hour they would reach her father's house. It was the last one in the block.

The pavements were covered with lime-sprayed pebbles but grass shot up even through the lime, and the blades were tipped with white.

It was very quiet there, and the glass door was always open.

Tanya would leave Tiger at the door when she went inside. She often wished that this could be reversed and that she could remain outside instead.

Not that anyone in the house was anything but kind to her.

Nadya would meet her at the door. A quiet, sweet-faced woman, unaffected in her manner, she would pat Tanya's shoulder or kiss her on the head, saying always the same words:

"Oh, here's Tanya!"

But though her voice was soft and gentle, Tanya's heart almost unwillingly filled with distrust.

"Why does she look at Father when she kisses me?" she thought. "It's as if she were telling him: 'See how nice I am to your daughter. There's nothing you or she can blame me for.' "

The thought alone was enough to make Tanya's tongue cleave to her palate and her

eyes cease to obey her—she could not force them to meet her father's.

Only when she came up to him and held his hand did she feel reassured.

She could then say hullo to Kolya.

"Hullo, Tanya!" he would reply amicably, but never before her nod of greeting.

And her father would say nothing, but only touch her cheek lightly and hurry her to the table.

Their meals were gay. They ate potatoes and venison purchased from passing Tungus hunters. Everyone tried to get the best pieces and they laughed at Kolya and scolded him for stuffing a whole potato into his mouth. Sometimes even her father would give him a resonant whack on the nose that made it swell a little.

"Oh, Dad," Kolya would say, frowning. "I wish you'd stop being silly. I'm not a baby any more!"

"That's true, you're not a baby, you're a scapegrace, and a big one," his father would reply. "You've all of you grown so big, how's a man to deal with you! But we'll just see what you're going to say when we get to the cherry pie!"

And he would glance slyly at Tanya.

And Tanya would think:

"What's the good of cherry pie if I know he'll never love me like he loves Kolya, never call me scapegrace or whack me on the nose, never snatch away a piece of meat if I've been greedy. Nor will I ever call him 'silly,' like that wretched little toady. Do they think they can bribe me with cherry pie?"

Gradually her heart filled with a sense of injury, and the old ache would be back, despite the fact that she felt attracted to the family, to the way Nadya's voice rang through the house, to her slender figure and kindly face, the tenderness in her eyes when she looked at Tanya; to her father's large form and his thick hide belt which always lay on the sofa; and to the bagatelle board where they all played, the metal ball tinkling as it rolled through the nails. She even liked Kolya, liked him and hated him. He was so very calm always, a look of obstinacy lurking in his clear eyes, and he never forgot to leave a bone for Tiger. But for her, Tanya, or so it seemed to her, he never had a thought, even though he went to school and had dinner and played bagatelle with her. He did not bother to think about her for even a minute during the day, if only to hate her as she hated him.

Why, then, had she agreed to go fishing with him and show him the spot where the bream would always bite?

VIII

Tanya loved stars, the morning and the evening stars, the large stars of summer burning low in the sky and the myriad stars of autumn, tiny and remote. When they were out it was pleasant to walk across the silent town to the river and look down at the dark, quiet water brimming with stars, like the sky. It was good to sit down on the bank, to cast the line and wait for the fish to bite, knowing that you had not wasted a minute of the time allowed for fishing.

Dawn would be far off, and it would be long before the sun pierced the mist of the river. First the trees would be wreathed in mist, and only then would it coil up like smoke from the water.

Meanwhile you could let your thoughts wander. You could think about the chipmunk and what it was doing, or wonder whether ants ever slept or felt cold in the early hours of the morning.

Night would be at its best just before dawn.

But this time, when Tanya woke up, there were few stars in the sky. Some had vanished and others gleamed palely on the edge of the horizon.

"It doesn't look like a good day for fishing," thought Tanya, "because Kolya was going to go with us."

And just then someone tapped twice at her window.

Slipping on her dress in the dark, she threw a shawl over her shoulders and, flinging open the window, jumped out into the garden.

Filka stood before her. In the pale dusk his eyes had a strange look and glittered like a madman's. His rods hung over his shoulder.

"Why are you late?" Tanya asked. "Didn't you dig up the worms last night?"

"Try digging them up in town!" said Filka hoarsely. "And it's not late. We'll be in good time."

"Yes, worms are hard to get," Tanya admitted. "Have you got my rod?"

"Yes."

"Well, then, let's go! What are we waiting for?"

"And Kolya?" Filka asked.

"Oh, yes, Kolya!" And Tanya knitted her brows in the dark just as if she had forgotten all about Kolya, as if she had not thought of him the moment she woke up and looked out of the window at the stars.

"We'll wait for him in the side-street by the quay," she said and whistled softly to Tiger.

But the dog did not stir from his home under the porch. He did not so much as move his paws. He only looked at Tanya as if to say:

"No, no, don't expect me to go. I've been with you time and again, to fish in summer and to skate in winter, I even carried your skates in my teeth. But I'm past such things now. I'm too old to be dragged out of the house at this unheard-of hour!"

Tanya understood.

"All right," she said, "stay if you want to."

But perhaps the cat would go with them.

"Cossack!" she called.

The cat got up and followed Tanya, taking her kittens with her.

"What do you need her for?" Filka asked.

"Never you mind, Filka," said Tanya. "She knows why we're going to the river just as well as we do."

And off they went, plunging deep into the morning as if into some magic forest that

had suddenly loomed up before them. The trees in the grove looked like wisps of smoke, and the smoke curling up from the chimneys was transformed into fantastic plants and bushes.

They stopped to wait for Kolya on the corner where the road sloped down.

He was long in coming, and Filka began blowing on his hands for he had got cold when he was digging for worms, the ground had been chilly.

Tanya gloated in silence. But her shivery little form and bare head, her fine hair curling damply seemed to say:

"See what Kolya's like!"

At last he came out of the side-street walking without haste. When he reached them he stamped his feet together, took his rod off his shoulder, and said:

"I'm so sorry I'm late. Zhenya got me to go to her place last night. She showed me all sorts of fishes that she keeps in a tank. Some of them are lovely. There's one that's all gold with a long black tail like a skirt. I couldn't take my eyes off it.... But I really am sorry."

Tanya trembled with rage.

"I'm so sorry, I'm so sorry!" she repeated several times over, mimicking Kolya. "How

terribly polite of you! Why did you keep us waiting all this time? You've made us miss the best fishing."

Kolya was silent.

"We haven't missed it. We have plenty of time. The sky's light but the water's still so dark you won't even see the float," said the more experienced Filka. "Why are you so cross, Tanya?"

"I'm cross because I hate over-polite people," Tanya replied. "I always feel they're trying to get the better of me."

"And I detest cats," Kolya said to Filka. "All cats. The ones that go fishing and the ones that don't. But that doesn't make me jump to hasty conclusions."

Filka, who could not bear to see people quarrel, looked sadly at both of them.

"Why are you always bickering? You do it in class and now you're doing it here," he said. "Now just you listen to me. He who quarrels before the hunt is best left at home. That's what my father says. And he knows."

Kolya shrugged.

"I don't know why it is, I don't want to quarrel with her. She's the one that starts it all. And Father says we must be friends."

"It doesn't matter what he says," said Tanya.

Filka looked at her still more sadly, and even Kolya, though he gave no sign, was distressed.

"No, I don't agree," Filka protested. "My father is a hunter and he doesn't talk much, but whatever he says is true."

"You see," Kolya said, "even your faithful Sancho Panza disagrees with you."

"Why do you call him Sancho Panza?" Tanya asked with a sneer. "Because you've only just read *Don Quixote*, I suppose?"

"No, I read *Don Quixote* a long time ago," Kolya replied calmly. "I called him that because, for one thing, he always carries your rods and digs up worms for you."

"He does that because he's a thousand times better than you!" Tanya burst out, blushing painfully. "Don't give him any worms, Filka!"

"Good heavens!" thought Filka. "They talk about me as if I were dead, and I'm still alive!"

Kolya shrugged again.

"I don't care, I'll dig up some worms for myself on the bank, and I'll find a good place to fish too. I don't want your old worms!"

He plunged down the slope, running out of sight behind some rocks and bushes, his footsteps ringing on the road below.

Tanya stood looking down towards the road long after he had disappeared. A milky fog rose up from the river, coiling over the ground and swallowing up the leaves, grass and sand.

Her heart also seemed shrouded in fog.

Filka watched her, distressed and speechless, not knowing what to say.

"What's the matter with you?" he asked at last, deciding to speak the truth. "Why do you pick on him? I sit at the same desk with him, and I know that there's just nothing bad to be said about him. He never sticks his nose up at anyone, though he's the best pupil in class, even better than you. I heard him speak German to the German teacher myself, and he speaks French too, but he hasn't told anyone about it. So why do you pick on him?"

Tanya did not reply. She moved on quietly toward the river lying asleep under the fog. Cossack and her kittens padded after her down the slope.

Filka followed them thinking that Kolya was a strange boy. Thousands, millions of cats could go fishing in the river, but if they

were with Tanya, then he, Filka, would be perfectly happy. Tanya was strange too! Why did she flare up when Kolya called him Sancho, or was it Panza? He, Filka, had never heard anything bad about those two, and he didn't care what he was called, anyway....

They descended the steep slope to the river, and when they reached the narrow landing-stage of planks where the fishing boats moored they saw Kolya sitting by the very spot that was best for fishing bream.

"He found it, after all!" said Filka to himself happily, immensely pleased in his heart of hearts.

He went up to Kolya, glanced into his can and, seeing only a handful of earth on its rusty bottom, dropped several worms into it, careful not to let Tanya see.

But Tanya, though she saw everything, said not a word. She took her fishing-rod and worms and sat down near Kolya. Filka went further ahead, choosing another spot for himself, just as good. He liked to be alone when he was fishing.

For a minute or two the children, and the cat family too, stared down into the river, spellbound. Something strange was taking place in the watery depths. It was as if a fog

were rising from them, a fog that had been held captive all night by someone's invisible hands and now, released, was running along the river's surface, dragging its long legs over the water. Rising up and up, it ran after the sun, swaying and reeling in the soaring heights. And as it grew lighter, the water grew lighter too. The fish came near the banks and were biting like mad! Tanya had never seen anything like it.

But fish are sly, and if you sit watching someone else's float instead of your own, they will hold their heads against the current and laugh at you.

Tanya kept lifting up her eyes to glance at Kolya's rod, and Kolya watched her float. They were each afraid that the other would get the first fish. Meanwhile the fish swallowed the bait and broke free from the hook.

Kolya was the first to give up. He got to his feet, yawning and cracking his joints.

"I knew nothing would come of it," he said aloud, to no one in particular. "It's such a bore staring at the water, it sends you to sleep. It's better to keep the stupid fish in a tank, like Zhenya does."

"Yes, they're very stupid, aren't they," said

Tanya loudly, "since they take ordinary glass for water."

Kolya was at a loss to find what else to say. He went up to the planks, which gave under his feet, leaving his rod behind. Cossack, who was sitting on the landing-stage and had deftly scooped up a good supply of small fish on to the planks with her paws, looked at him warily. She edged away, giving him room to pass. But the kitten Eagle, fascinated by the tiny fish that darted about under his very nose, had moved too close to the edge and, swaying on the wet plank, forgot to put out his claws in time and fell into the water with a soft splash.

When Tanya looked up, he had been swept away to the other side of the landing-stage. He was drowning, and Cossack ran, screaming, up and down over the wet sand.

Tanya sprang lightly to her feet, barely touching the planks with her hands.

She jumped to the edge of the water and began to wade in, her dress billowing out till it looked like the trumpet of a forest flower. Cossack followed her in, and only Kolya stayed where he was.

Reaching out one hand, Tanya caught the

kitten. Wet and bedraggled, Eagle looked smaller than a rat; he hardly moved.

Tanya put him on a stone and Cossack began to lick him.

Kolya had not moved.

"You threw him into the water on purpose. I saw you!" cried Tanya angrily.

Kolya said nothing.

"He's just a coward," Tanya told herself, and she stamped her foot to get him out of his trance. But he was so amazed that he could not utter a word.

Tanya rushed away. She ran up the cliff, her wet skirt clinging to her knees.

Kolya overtook her on the top of the cliff, by the fishermen's huts, and gasping for breath, caught her hand in his.

"Tanya," he panted, "believe me, I had nothing to do with it.... It was an accident, The kitten fell in by himself."

"Let go of me!" Tanya spluttered, trying to wrest free. "I'm not going to fish any more! I'm going home!"

"Then I'll go too."

He dropped her hand and moved after her.

"Don't you dare follow me!" Tanya cried.

She halted by a high rock up against a fisherman's hut.

"But you're coming to dinner, aren't you?" Kolya asked. "It's Sunday today. Dad will be expecting you. He'll say that I did something to hurt your feelings."

"So that's what you're afraid of," Tanya said, stepping back against the big rock.

"No, you don't understand me. You see, I love my father, and I don't want to hurt him or to have you hurt him. That's the point."

"That's enough," she said. "I understand perfectly. I'm not coming to dinner today. I'll never come to your house any more."

She moved away and disappeared behind the wall of the hut.

Kolya sat down on the rock. It was dry and warm with the sun except for a dark patch where Tanya's dress had made it damp.

Kolya touched the wet patch.

"A strange girl, Tanya," he said to himself, as Filka had before him. "Does she think I'm a coward? A strange girl," he repeated with assurance. "She can say or do anything. No use being surprised at her." And putting his hand back on the rock, he lost himself in thought.

Filka had seen nothing. He sat on the ground, hidden in a tiny bay, catching small, black-eyed flat-fish. His biggest catch was a

large-headed carp, which he killed with a sharp stone right there on the sand. After that he decided to take a rest and looked back at the landing-stage. Two rods were swaying over the water and the lines were tightly stretched—the fish were caught on the hook—but neither Kolya nor Tanya were anywhere to be seen. The rocky path was deserted.

Filka looked up at the mountains. The wind played over them, a lonely wind that gathered no clouds.

A wet cat and her kittens were wending their way slowly from the quay up the cliff.

IX

Tanya did go to her father's for dinner, after all. She climbed up on the porch and gave the glass door a sharp push, throwing it wide open. Leaving Tiger outside, she banged the door shut behind her.

It was her undisputed right to go to the house whenever she felt like it. Her father lived there. She went to see him and no one else. And if anyone thought that this was not so and that cherry pie was an additional at-

traction, then they must think again! And Tanya banged the door a second time, more loudly than before.

The door replied with its glassy voice, shivering and jangling from top to bottom.

Tanya went up to the table and slipped into her place.

The family were already having dinner and there was a big bowl of *pelmeni** on the table.

"Tanya, you've come!" her father cried joyfully. "Splendid! And Kolya said you weren't coming today. I'm glad you changed your mind. Come on, help yourself. Nadya has made you some *pelmeni*. Kolya helped her. He did a fine job, as you can see."

"Indeed!" Tanya thought. "So he knows how to do that too!"

She sat bent low over the table, keeping her eyes fastened stubbornly on her father, on the wall, on Nadya's friendly hands that passed her now the bread, now the *pelmeni*, and never once looked at Kolya.

He was hunched in his seat, his head drawn in between his shoulders, a little smile playing on his lips. "Dad," he said, "why did

**Pelmeni*—small boiled dumplings stuffed with minced meat.—*Tr.*

you tell Tanya that I helped to make the *pelmeni*? Now she won't even try them."

"Why, have you quarrelled?" inquired her father anxiously.

"Oh, no, Dad," Kolya replied, "we never quarrel. You told us yourself that we must be friends."

"That's better!" said the father.

And Kolya, bending over the table, hissed in Tanya's ear:

"Who was it that told me she wouldn't come to dinner today?"

"I haven't come to dinner," Tanya replied loudly. "I'm not hungry. No, no, I'm not a bit hungry," she repeated, for her father and his wife had both started to protest.

"Why aren't you hungry?" her father asked her again in confusion. "Don't you want any *pelmeni*?"

"No, thanks, I had my dinner with Mother."

"You needn't ask her a third time, Dad," said Kolya mockingly, "she won't eat anyway."

"Well, if she won't, she won't," said the father regretfully. "Too bad though. The *pelmeni* are very good!"

Oh, yes, wonderfully good they were, light dumplings stuffed with juicy meat. But these

people were funny—to serve *pelmeni* with vinegar—what a strange thing to do! They ought to be eaten with milk. You sprinkled them with pepper and swallowed them one by one, washing each one down with milk, and they fired the blood like a magic flame!

Thoughts swept through Tanya's brain like little whirlwinds, but her eyes were fastened on her plate where the *pelmeni* were cooling rapidly. She was a little dizzy because she had not eaten anything and because her heart did not know what it wanted. She had come to the house, like one blind, hearing nothing but her heartbeat. Perhaps if she started an argument, it would help her to regain her composure.

"Daddy," she said suddenly, "is it true that herrings are born salty? Kolya says they are. He says zoology is all wrong, that it's not even a science."

"What do you mean? I don't understand," said her father.

Kolya stopped eating. He wiped his lips and passed his hand over his face which expressed extreme astonishment. He had never said anything of the kind. But his astonishment passed when he remembered that only

that morning he had decided not to be surprised at anything Tanya might do or say.

In a moment he had regained his presence of mind and was gazing at Tanya fixedly, a smile twinkling in his clear eyes.

"Of course it's not," he said. "How can it be a science if all it says is that a cat is something with four feet and a tail!"

Tanya's forehead and cheeks flushed crimson. She knew what cat he meant.

"What subjects do you like then?" she asked.

"Mathematics. If two circles have a common point, then.... I like literature too. There's something gentle about it."

"Gentle?" Tanya echoed.

And though she had a penchant for the arts and loved Dickens and Walter Scott and, even more, Krylov and Gogol, she said scornfully:

"I don't think so. 'One day an ass saw a nightingale....' Why, it's stupid."

They went on, without smiling at their own jokes, their eyes darting sparks of anger and disdain, till their father, who could not understand what the argument was about, said:

"Stop being silly, children. I don't know what you're talking about."

Tanya's head was going round and round and there was a loud hammering in her ears. She was hungry. Hunger tore at her heart and brain and even seemed to seep into her blood. She closed her eyes to avoid seeing the food. When she reopened them, the table was being cleared. The dish of *pelmeni*, the bread and the salt-cellar had been removed. Only her plate was still in its place. But Nadya was already reaching out for it. Unwittingly, Tanya held back the plate with her hand only to curse the offending hand in her heart.

"What's the matter?" asked Nadya. "Shall I leave you the *pelmeni*?"

"No, no, I only wanted to give Tiger a few. May I?"

"Certainly," said her father, "you can give him the whole plate if you like."

Running her fork through several of the already cold *pelmeni*, Tanya carried them out on the porch. Here, squatting down in front of Tiger, she ate them one by one, washing each with her tears.

Tiger was puzzled, and his loud barking drowned out the sound of footsteps behind Tanya.

Her father's hands suddenly came down on her shoulders, and his eyes searched hers.

"I saw everything through the glass door," he said. "What's the matter, darling, are you in trouble?"

He lifted her up and held her as if to weigh the grief burdening her heart.

Tanya looked at him quietly. He still seemed to be as remote and as big as the tallest trees in the forest which, though she could touch their trunks, she could not see in one single glance.

She leaned lightly against his shoulder.

"Tell me what's wrong, Tanya. Perhaps I can help you. Tell me what makes you glad and what makes you sad and what you are thinking about at this minute."

But she would tell him nothing.

"I have mother," she was thinking, "and a home and dinner and even a dog and a cat, but I have no father."

But this, sitting on his knees, she could not tell him. Her words would make him turn pale, as pale as this big, courageous man had never been, not even before the hardest battle.

She did not know, could not suspect that now, awake or asleep, he never stopped thinking about her, that he uttered her name, which till then he had recalled but rarely, with affection and love, and that even at that

moment when he held her on his knees he was thinking: "I let my happiness slip away, I never held my own baby in my arms. . . ."

But this she could not know.

She only leaned against him.

But, oh, how sweet, how truly sweet it was to be sitting there!

It was late autumn, the porch was wet with rain and the late afternoon air was chilly, but Tanya was warm. She sat with her father a long time, watching the stars she knew so well flare up over the road, over the lime-washed walk, over the house with the glass door.

X

A tree can sometimes be quite human. This particular tree grew in the back-yard of the school where the firewood was dumped, and could be seen clearly through the classroom windows. As you slipped into your seat in the morning and looked out, it smiled and called "hullo," and you smiled too and waved.

Its leaves had fallen, but even without them it was beautiful. Its branches were alive and reached to the sky, and its trunk was dark.

Whether it was an elm or an ash Tanya did not know, but the snow, the first snow of the year, toppling on to it as if drunk and clutching at its boughs and bark, could not retain its hold and melted.

"It must be alive and warm inside, like me, like the others," thought Tanya, giving the tree a friendly little nod.

Kolya was at the blackboard, answering his lesson. He was speaking about Izergil.*

He had an intelligent face. Clear, merry eyes looked out from under a bulging forehead. And what he said was full of sparkle and life.

Alexandra Ivanovna was pleased and told herself that this new boy would be a credit to her class.

"I saw Gorky once," he brought out unexpectedly, blushing to the roots of his hair. There was nothing he hated so much as boasting.

The children understood his embarrassment.

"Tell us about it!" they cried.

"You saw Gorky," said Alexandra Ivanovna. "How thrilling! Where did you see him? Did you speak to him?"

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* A character from one of Gorky's stories.—*Tr.*

"No, I saw him through the trees in a garden. It was in the Crimea. But I don't remember it very well. I was only ten when my father took me there."

"What was Gorky doing in the garden?"

"Building a fire near the path."

"Tell us about it."

But there was little he remembered. He told them about a hilly country in the south, a country of grey, sun-warmed roads where donkeys brayed in the mornings and rough, dark grape leaves peeked out from behind stone fences.

The children listened, spellbound.

Tanya alone did not seem to hear anything. She kept looking out through the window, watching the first snow fall on the naked, shivering tree.

"Grapes," she was thinking. "And I've never seen anything but spruces and firs."

She fell into a reverie, trying to picture a blossoming apple- or pear-tree or corn growing in the fields.

Flowers and plants of rare beauty rose up in her imagination.

Alexandra Ivanovna, leaning on the window-sill, had been watching Tanya for some

time. This girl, her favourite pupil, was worrying her.

"Can she be thinking about boys and dances?" Alexandra Ivanovna asked herself. "Her memory is as good as ever, but her gaze is absent, and she only got a 'good' in history last time."

She said:

"Tanya Sabaneyeva, you aren't listening."

Tanya, tearing her gaze with difficulty from the window, got to her feet. She was still far away, wandering in the distant, invisible realms of her fancy.

"Well, Tanya?"

"He's not telling us anything interesting."

"That's not true. It's very interesting, and we've all been listening with pleasure. Were you ever in the Crimea and did you ever see Gorky? Just think—the real Gorky!"

"My father never took me there," said Tanya, her voice trembling.

"All the more reason why you should listen to Kolya."

"I won't listen to him."

"Why won't you?"

"Because what he's saying has nothing to do with our Russian lesson."

Alexandra Ivanovna moved slowly away from the window and came towards Tanya. Her footsteps, usually so light and soft, resounded through the class. She was very much upset, and her eyes were stern.

Tanya waited humbly.

"Please tell your father to come to see me tomorrow," said Alexandra Ivanovna.

She looked sternly at Tanya, at her flaming forehead and her lips and was surprised to see these lips that had just uttered such impertinent words blanch suddenly.

"I'll tell Mother, she'll come," said Tanya softly.

The teacher hesitated. She was asking herself what had come over Tanya and finding no answer. Perhaps the boy had something to do with it.

She decided to pay Tanya's mother a visit and have a talk with her. Lifting her hand, she touched Tanya's fingers.

"Your impudence—something is behind it," she said. "I will disregard it this time. Your father and mother needn't come. But you must realize that you have behaved as no Young Pioneer has the right to behave. You don't say what you think. You, who were al-

ways such a fair-minded girl. I can't understand what's come over you."

Still very much upset, she went to her desk.

The children were silent and sat without moving. Only Zhenya, the fat girl, twisted round in her seat so quickly that she nearly put her neck out of joint.

"Tanya's in love with him, that's all," she told Filka in a whisper and got a kick from him in reply.

But what could anyone do with her! She was just a silly little chatterbox with no room for imagination in her curly head!

Tanya still stood by her desk, gripping it with her hands. Her fingers were trembling weakly. She would have fallen had her willpower been as numb as her tongue.

"Why are you standing? Sit down," said Alexandra Ivanovna.

"May I change my seat?"

"Why? Don't you like sitting with Zhenya?"

"I didn't say that," said Tanya, "but the tree I see through the window distracts me."

"Very well. Go to another place. You are a queer girl, Tanya."

Tanya went to the last desk in the row and sat down. She would be alone there.

"You sit down too, Kolya," the teacher said.

Preoccupied with Tanya, she had forgotten all about him.

But Kolya did not move. He stood where he was, leaning forward as though he were standing on a steep mountain path instead of the smooth schoolroom floor. His face was red, and his eyes were screwed up and had a look of obstinacy in them.

"That will do, Kolya," Alexandra Ivanovna repeated. "Sit down. You deserve your 'excellent.' "

"May I take Tanya Sabaneyeva's seat?"

"What's happened to you two?"

But she permitted him to do as he wished, and out of sheer obstinacy he slipped into the seat beside Zhenya.

Tanya, alone at her desk, looked out of the window, hoping that she would no longer be able to see the tree. But she could. The snow had stopped melting and was covering its boughs and whirling over its topmost branches which faded gradually out of sight in the enveloping haze.

XI

"When a person is left alone, he risks straying off the right path," thought Filka, standing alone in the empty street where he and Tanya generally walked home from school together. He had been waiting for her on the corner, by the Chinese peddler's stand, for a whole hour, but something, the sweet, sticky cakes heaped on the tray or the peddler himself in his wooden clogs, had distracted his attention, and how here he was alone, and Tanya had gone off by herself, and this was equally bad for them both.

Had this happened in the taiga, Filka would have known what to do—he would have followed Tanya's tracks. But here, in town, this would only make him the object of ridicule and might even earn him the dreaded nickname of "hound." And thinking this over, Filka came to the bitter conclusion that he knew many things which were quite useless in town.

He knew how to track down a sable near a forest creek, on newly-fallen snow; he knew that if the grain in the shed froze overnight, it was safe to harness the dogs and go visiting for the ice would not crack under the

runners; he knew that if the wind blew from Chorny Cape and there was a full moon, you could expect a blizzard.

But in town no one looked at the moon. The newspapers told them when the ice was safe for travel, and the flag was hoisted on the watch-tower or a gun fired to give warning of an impending blizzard.

Filka's life in town was just like any other boy's. The art of tracking animals in the snow was not part of the school curriculum, but a boy was expected to solve the most formidable arithmetic problems and to ferret out subjects and predicates in sentences, a task that would leave the best hunter in the taiga baffled.

This time, however, Filka decided to do things in his own way, and if anyone laughed at him or called him "hound," well, he would just have to pretend he didn't care a jot.

He squatted down in the middle of the street and carefully examined every footprint there.

He was in luck. The street was a quiet one, and the snow was fresh and hardly touched.

After a while Filka stood up and moved on, his gaze still fastened on the ground. He

now knew who had passed here just as surely as if he had seen them with his own eyes.

Tanya's solitary tracks followed the fence. She had walked alone, ahead of the others, trying to step lightly so as not to spoil the soft, fluffy snow. The prints of Zhenya's galoshes ran beside Kolya's, who took small steps that were nevertheless firm because of the stubbornness with which he stamped on the snow.

How strangely Zhenya and Kolya had behaved. Time and again they had swung off the road and waited and then had hurried on and overtaken Tanya. They seemed to have been laughing at her. And Tanya had walked on with a troubled heart. She had never left such tracks in Filka's garden or on the sandy river-bank where they had gone fishing together.

But where had Tanya vanished? Her footprints ended abruptly in a spot where no porch or gate was visible. Could she have soared up into the sky like a swallow? Or had she been whirled up like a leaf and sent dancing and spinning round and round in the clouds? Surely, she could never have scaled such a high fence!

Filka stood still for a second and then followed in Zhenya's and Kolya's tracks again. They ran side by side at first, but separated on the corner in high dudgeon.

"They quarrelled," Filka deduced. Laughing, he retraced his steps and stood thoughtfully over Tanya's tracks where they ended by the fence. Then he raised his hand.

"Yes, there's a piece of wood jutting out on the side of the fence, and she must have swung herself up. Tanya has strong legs," he told himself. "But if mine aren't twice as strong, our gym master can bury me alive." And throwing his satchel over the fence, Filka jumped so high that an old woman passing by called him "a regular little demon."

But Filka did not hear her. He was already on the other side of the fence in someone's vegetable garden, making his way along Tanya's tracks.

At the end of the garden he cleared another fence, not quite so high, and reached the small wood behind Tanya's house.

He rounded some stubby snowball-bushes that dropped their berries in the snow, and looked at the wood. The young birches and new snow were white and frosty and made

the wood seem a thing of fancy, something that Filka, though he had grown up in the forest, had never seen even in his dreams. Each branch was as sharply etched as if it had been drawn in chalk, the trunks seemed to be wreathed in smoke, and the bark running with tiny, shimmering lights.

In this silvery grove Tanya was standing quite still amid the motionless trees. She was crying and did not hear the sound of Filka's footsteps or the rustle of branches as he pushed them aside.

Filka ducked behind the bushes that hid him like a wall and crouched in the snow for a minute. Then, crawling back softly, he rushed out of the wood.

"If a person is left alone," Filka told himself again, "he risks straying off the right path. He will hound other people like a dog and jump over fences and watch furtively from behind bushes, like a fox. But when someone is crying, it is best to leave him alone."

Making a long detour around the wood, Filka turned into a side-street and reached the gate of Tanya's house. He opened it and boldly entered the house. To Tanya's old nurse he explained that he would like to see

Tanya's mother and tell her that the study circle was meeting at school and that Tanya would therefore get home later than usual.

The nurse showed him where to go, but Filka, opening the door a crack, shut it again quickly. He had caught a glimpse of Alexandra Ivanovna sitting beside Tanya's mother on a small red sofa, her arm around her shoulders. She was telling her something in urgent tones, and both women held tiny white handkerchiefs with which they wiped their eyes now and again. Were they too in trouble?

Filka tiptoed away, trying to step lightly so that the floor-boards would not creak. Reaching the porch without incident, he walked briskly to the gate.

Yes, he knew many things that were useless in town. He could tell animals by their voices, he knew the use of herbs and could determine the depth of rivers. He had learned that you should not stop up the cracks with felt if you built a house in the forest for the birds would steal it for their nests.

But he did not know what to do when he found two people crying together instead of laughing, and he decided to let them cry in peace while he attended to his dogs, for

winter had come and the ice would soon cover the river and glow like copper in the moonlight.

XII

The snow fell off and on until the winter holidays came, and soon the town was buried under it. The shutters could not be opened without a great deal of trouble, trenches had to be dug in the snow for the people to walk along the pavements, and the road itself became much higher. But the snow went on falling, engulfing the river and the mountains. Only in the school yard where it was trampled continually underfoot was it defeated; there, it clung close to the ground, pressed hard and smooth so that it could easily be used like modelling clay.

For several days now Tanya had been spending the lunch break out of doors, making a figure out of snow.

She had finished it at last, and the boys who had been helping her took the ladder back to the fence and carried away the pail of water while Tanya stepped aside to get a good look at her masterpiece.

The figure was that of a helmeted soldier

with shoulders as broad as her father's and with his proud bearing. It looked like a sentry posted at the world's end, leaning on his rifle, his eyes fixed in space, the dark sea stretching out before him. There was no sea, really, but so vividly was it brought to mind that for a long time the children stood gazing at it in silence. Then the older boys surrounded Tanya without her noticing it and tossed her up into the air with loud whoops. Some of the girls squealed, though no one had touched them, but Tanya, excited and somewhat flustered though she was, did not cry out. She had never expected to do so well with her snow man, nor had she given any preliminary thought to how she would go about making him. She had only been caught up in the idea and went on modelling till she had added a bayonet to the rifle and coated it with a sparkling layer of ice. Now her fingers ached from the cold water and snow and she had thrust them into her mouth to warm them.

Kolya stood some distance away, making no move to draw nearer.

Hearing the cheers, Alexandra Ivanovna came out into the yard without her overcoat and stood in admiration before the snow sentry, struck by the figure's beauty.

The fine hairs on her woollen dress were soon covered with hoarfrost and the little garnet star at her neck grew clouded, but still she stood there, recalling her own childhood and the games that had gone with it.

She and her playmates too had once made snow men. She remembered one of them particularly well. They had put it in a corner of the yard, and at night, when the yard and the brick walls of the houses were washed with moonlight, it had been terrifying to look at. Its round, swollen head with a piece of black coal for a mouth had been ringed with a halo. One evening, catching a glimpse of it through the window, she had been frightened and had burst out crying. No one but herself had known why she had cried. She had lain awake all night, and in the weird light of the moon the snow man had seemed to her to be a strange monster from some underground kingdom.

Now, twenty years later, she looked round to make sure that the fearful snow man was not still behind her. Here and there about the yard stood warriors and heroes of snow and even a knight on horseback. None of them could compete with Tanya's sentry, but all were both naïve and highly fanciful.

"Did you make the sentry?" Alexandra Ivanovna asked, turning to Tanya.

Tanya nodded and took her fingers out of her mouth.

"You're cold, Alexandra Ivanovna," she said, "and your little star's all clouded. May I touch it?" And stretching out her hand, Tanya rubbed the star with her finger till it glowed.

"Would you like to have it as a prize for having made such a fine sentry?" asked Alexandra Ivanovna.

Tanya was startled.

"Oh, no, Alexandra Ivanovna. We all think of you with the star on your dress. I'd hate to deprive the others of it." And Tanya ran to the gate where Filka stood beckoning to her.

Alexandra Ivanovna went slowly back to the porch, thinking about Tanya. How often lately had she seen her sad and absent-minded, but with beauty gracing her every movement. Perhaps, love's soft breath had touched her heart.

"Well, nothing's so terrible about that," thought the teacher, smiling. "But what's that she's chewing so energetically? Not that resin that the Chinese peddler sells! O love,

sweet love that can be tempered with a piece of resin!" And laughing softly, Alexandra Ivanovna closed the door behind her, leaving the children to themselves.

She had not been mistaken. Filka had procured a large piece of fir resin and was handing it out right and left to all his schoolmates, except Zhenya.

"Give me some too, Filka!" Zhenya shouted.

"None for the girls, Filka!" the boys said, laughing, for Filka's generosity was known to all.

"Why not?" Filka questioned. "And I'll give Zhenya the biggest piece if she comes up here."

Zhenya needed no persuading.

Filka took a small paper bag out of his pocket and put it into her hand.

"You've given me much too much," said Zhenya in wonder, unwrapping the paper. There on her hand sat a tiny, new-born mouse. With a cry, Zhenya dropped it to the ground, and the girls who had been standing near her scattered.

The mouse sat shivering in the snow.

"What are you doing!" said Tanya angrily. "It'll freeze."

Bending down, she picked up the mouse, blew on it to warm it and put it inside the lapels of her coat.

A man no one in town had ever seen before approached the crowd of children. He had on a Siberian cap of foxskin and a heavy fur coat, but the children noticed that his footwear was much too light and unsuitable for the cold weather.

"A newcomer," said Filka. "He's not from these parts."

"Yes, a newcomer," the others agreed.

They all watched him come near, and one nimble little girl clutched him by the coat.

"Are you an inspector?" she asked him.

The man did not reply, but reaching Tanya's side, asked:

"Can you tell me where I can find the head master, children?"

Everyone drew back. Anything might happen. For all they knew, he might really be the inspector.

"Why don't you answer?" he asked them, and turning to Tanya, said: "Please show me to the head master's office, my dear."

Tanya, thinking that he was speaking to someone else, glanced round.

"No, I mean you, the grey-eyed girl with the mouse."

Tanya looked at him, wide-eyed, chewing the resin loudly. The mouse, revived by the warmth under her coat collar, was peeping out from behind her shoulder.

The man smiled at it.

Spitting out the resin, Tanya led the way to the porch.

"Who can it be?" Kolya said.

"The inspector from Vladivostok, most likely," someone said.

"No, a hero!" Filka exclaimed in awed tones. "A hero! Honest, he is. I saw an Order on his breast."

XIII

Contrary to their expectations, the stranger turned out to be a writer. God knows why he had come to this town in winter without felt boots! His boots were even worse than the roughly stitched hide ones that prospectors wear. They were of ordinary grey canvas that could not pretend to keep his feet warm. But his overcoat was very long and warm and so was his hat, and he had been seen in

them at the Frontier Guards' Club. It was said that he had been born in the town and had once gone to this very school.

Was it that he wanted to bring back the years he had lived there as a boy? ... The wind blowing in his face was cold and biting, but like the snow that powdered his lashes it had been a part of his childhood; so had the river, and it was only natural that he would want to see how new trees and bushes had sprung up along its banks. Or had he simply grown weary of his fame and, like those huge, sharp-eyed birds that soared high over the estuary all day and dropped suddenly on to the stubby spruces of the riverside, longed to rest in the stillness?

But Tanya thought differently.

She was thinking that even if he was not Gorky, he was none the less a real writer, who had come to her remote town so that she, Tanya, could look at him and, perhaps, even get to know him.

He was not old, but his temples were grey and his voice was oddly high and shrill.

She had been afraid he would ask her if she liked Pushkin or if she found his own books interesting.

But all he had said was:

"Thank you, my dear. What are you going to do with that mouse of yours?"

The writer, as everybody could see, said only the most ordinary things, but he complicated matters a great deal for them all.

What fun it had been at the literary circle before he came when they met every ten days under the chairmanship of Alexandra Ivanovna.

They would all take seats at the long table in the Pioneers' room and there was an armchair for Alexandra Ivanovna who, on those occasions, differed from her usual self, as if an invisible ship had brought her there from strange lands.

She would put her chin on her laced fingers and recite:

When yellow fields are breathless with
the wind,
Whose silver voice the wakeful forest
thrills....

Here she would pause, think a while and then say:

"No, I'd like you to hear something else today. This, for instance:

And to my lips he closely clung,
And out he tore my sinful tongue,
A friend to idleness and cunning....

Ah, children, I wish I could make you understand. A poet can work magic with words, he gives them such a wealth of meaning!"

But Filka, who did not understand, longed to tear out his own tongue because it knocked senselessly against his teeth and helped them to chew anything that found its way into his mouth, but was singularly incapable of poetic creation.

Not that Filka was without his gifts. He could, for instance, do an excellent imitation of the Chinese peddler who sold "stickies" on the street corner.

"I give you smallie-smallie piece, biggie-biggie piece, very good piece!" he would sing out, sending the children into gales of laughter.

Then Zhenya would recite a poem she had written about frontier guards, and Tanya would read one of her stories. Kolya, who wrote nothing himself for fear of writing badly, was a dispassionate and scathing critic.

But even Kolya had had no criticism to make when Tanya had read to them her sto-

ry about a baby mouse who lived in the sleeve of an old overcoat. One day the coat was carried out from the store-room where it had lain into the frost, and the mouse, seeing snow for the first time, mistook it for sugar.

"People ought to be ashamed of themselves for trampling on sugar!" thought the mouse, and out it jumped from the sleeve. Poor little mouse! How would it live in the cold?

Tanya, interpreting Kolya's silence as praise, had been deliriously happy all day and even at night, in her sleep. But in the morning she had torn up her story and thrown it out.

"How can I be happy just because that cheeky boy didn't criticize me?" she asked herself.

Things changed when the writer arrived. New cares and new problems arose.

Where, for instance, were they to find the flowers they would have to give to the writer? With the earth under snow, they could not pick even the humble horse-tails in the swamp and the most ordinary weeds in the forest were dead.

The problem seemed insoluble. Tanya, who had no more flowers in her garden, could

think of no solution, nor could any of the others.

Then Zhenya, who was a practical soul, said:

"We have some Turkish caps in pots at home and they've just come into bloom."

"So have we," the other girls chimed in, "and Chinese roses and fuchsias. . . ."

"And we. . ." Filka began, but then he remembered that his landlady had no flowers in the house. Instead, she kept a sow which his dogs were determined to tear to pieces.

The result of their common efforts was a large bouquet.

Then they had to decide who would present it, who would go up on to the stage in the large school hall packed with people, with its forty lamps alight, shake the great man's hand and say:

"On behalf of all the Young Pioneers. . ."

"Let Tanya do it!" Filka cried loudly.

"No, let Zhenya," said the girls. "She was the one who had the idea."

Logic was with the girls, but the boys protested, all except Kolya, who said nothing. When finally Tanya was chosen, he covered his eyes with his hand and no one could understand whose side he supported.

"And so," said Alexandra Ivanovna, "you will go on to the stage, to our visitor, Tanya, shake his hand and then give him the flowers. We've already decided what you are to say, and you won't forget it. And now, since there's not much time left, you'd better take the bouquet."

Tanya picked up the flowers and, holding them close to her breast, walked out of the room.

This really did make up for all she had suffered! She would shake the famous man's hand and give him the bouquet. And many years later, five years later, perhaps, she would be able to tell her friends that she too had seen something of the world.

Tanya's face was wreathed in smiles. She beamed at everyone, even at Zhenya whose malicious glances she failed to see.

"Why should they have chosen Tanya Sabaneyeva, of all people? It's not right, is it?" said Zhenya to her friends. "Now I don't care about myself, I'm not a bit vain, but we all know that Kolya is much cleverer than she is and I should have thought he would be the one. But no, the boys wanted Tanya! I know why, too. It's because she has pretty eyes. Even the writer said something about them."

"He only said they were grey," said Kolya, laughing. "But you're right as usual, Zhenya. They *are* pretty. You'd love to have such eyes yourself, wouldn't you?"

"Who, me? Not at all!" Zhenya protested vehemently.

Tanya felt she could not stand it another minute. The flowers she held seemed to grow as heavy as stones. Quickening her step, she broke into a run. She ran past the classrooms and past the large hall where the scraping of chairs told her that people were taking their seats.

Rushing down the stairs, she stopped, panting, in the dark, empty cloak-room. She had never met with all the eloquence of envy before and was unprepared for it.

"Is it true, what she says about me?" she asked herself. "If it is, then I have not the right to be a Pioneer. I don't care if I do miss this chance. I'd rather miss it than listen to such talk."

Her legs felt quite wobbly.

No, that was nonsense. What they had said wasn't true.

But she just had to take a look at her eyes.

At this time of day the cloak-room, dark and shadowy as a forest glade, was empty

and quiet. An enormous old mirror stood against one white wall. It tilted forward and its black lacquered stand shook whenever the children ran past. The mirror, moving like a light, floating cloud, reflected their faces.

But it was still now. Ink-wells, washed and scrubbed by the watchman, were ranged along the stand. The ink too was here in three bottles—a small one, a long quart-sized one with a label and a huge flask standing on the floor. Did they really need such a large quantity of ink so that she, Tanya, could dip the point of her pen in it.

Going carefully around the large flask, Tanya went up to the mirror. She glanced round—the watchman was not in sight—and, leaning her elbows on the stand, she put her face near the glass. From its depths, lighter than the surrounding dusk, her eyes, grey like her mother's, looked back at her. They were large and starry, light shadows playing deep down in them, and they seemed fathomless.

Tanya stood without moving for several moments, as startled as an animal of the woods when it sees its reflection for the first time. She sighed deeply.

They were the most normal sort of eyes.

Regretfully, Tanya drew back and stood up. And at once, as if mimicking her movement, the mirror swayed on its stand, throwing Tanya's eyes back at her. The ink bottle suddenly craned forward and started rolling, jangling as it collided with the empty inkwells.

Tanya reached out quickly. But, like a live thing, the bottle dodged her hand and rolled on. Tanya tried to catch it and managed to touch it with her fingers. But the bottle slid from her grasp, struggling and writhing and disgorging a black liquid, like an octopus. It fell to the floor with the dull plop of a clod of clay crumbling off the river-bank and dropping into the water.

Something that happens at least once in every girl's life had now happened to Tanya —she had spilled the ink.

"How awful!" she exclaimed.

She sprang away, lifting her left hand that clutched the flowers. Several black drops glistened on the pale petals of the Chinese roses. Still, that was nothing, the petals could be plucked off. But her other hand! Despairingly, Tanya twirled it in front of her eyes, turning the palm now up, now down. It was black to the very wrist!

"How curious!"

So close to her ear did the words sound that Tanya almost thought she had said them herself.

She jerked up her head.

Kolya stood beside her, looking at her hand.

"How very curious," he repeated. "How can you ever shake the great man's hand now! He's already arrived, by the way, and is in the teachers' room. Everyone's waiting. Alexandra Ivanovna sent me to get you."

For a second Tanya stood without moving. Her eyes, which had just looked in the mirror with such interest, were now dark and anguished.

What bad luck!

Holding the flowers out to Kolya, she wanted to say: "Take them. Let Zhenya present them. She has a good memory too."

He would take them, she was sure, and perhaps he and Zhenya would laugh at her together.

But she did not say it. She turned away from Kolya sharply and started to run, dashing between the rows of children's coats that followed her flight like a line of silent witnesses. She ran to the wash-room and used

up all the water she found there trying to wash the ink off her hand. Then she rubbed it with sand. But nothing helped—her hand was as black as ever.

"He'll tell them anyway, I know he will! He'll tell Alexandra Ivanovna and Zhenya and the others," she thought.

And so she would not go on the stage today, she would not give their celebrated visitor the flowers or shake his hand. It was astonishing what bad luck she had with flowers, considering how she loved them!

First, she had given some to a sick boy, only to have him turn out to be Kolya, the last person who deserved them, common marsh lilies though they were. And now—these delicate blooms that could only be grown in pots! If another girl had got them —what wonderful things might have ensued! But she, Tanya, must give them up.

Tanya shook the drops of water from her hand and wandered slowly from the cloakroom without wiping it. She could take her time. Nothing mattered any more!

She climbed up the stairs, where each step was tipped with copper, and walked at a leisurely pace along the corridor, glancing out

of the windows into the yard for a glimpse of her tree which usually consoled her.

But the tree was nowhere to be seen. Indeed, this was not surprising for it grew on the opposite side of the building.

Tearing her gaze from the window, Tanya caught sight of the writer at the end of the corridor.

He had taken off his heavy overcoat and was in a long, high-collared Caucasian shirt, caught at the waist with a narrow silver thong.

The silvery hair on the back of his head shone, and so did the thong, and there were so many buttons on his shirt that Tanya lost count of them.

He had his back to her and since he was walking swiftly, the distance between them increased rapidly. In a moment he would turn the corner, reach the teachers' room and be lost to her for ever.

"Comrade writer!" she called to him, despair in her voice.

He stopped, spun round as though he were on a spring and came back towards her, waving his arms and knitting his brow, trying to understand what this girl wanted. Had she stopped him to give him her flowers?

And he gave Tanya's bouquet a cursory glance. He was used to floral tributes.

"Comrade writer, tell me, are you a kind man?" Tanya asked.

He bent down to look at her more closely.

"No, please tell me, are you a kind man?" she said again, a plea in her voice, drawing him after her to the back of the empty corridor.

"Do tell me, Comrade writer. Are you kind?" she repeated for the third time.

What could he say to her?

"Why do you want to know, my dear?"

"If you are, then please, please don't give me your hand."

"Why, have you done something wrong?"

"Oh, no, no! That isn't what I meant. I am to give you the bouquet after you have spoken to us and to thank you on behalf of the Pioneers. And of course you'll give me your hand. But I can't give you mine. Something horrible has happened to me. Look." And she showed him her hand—it was a thin hand and long-fingered and it was smeared all over with ink.

He sat down on the window-sill and gave a shout of laughter, drawing Tanya close.

His laughter, high and ringing, struck her by its strangeness even more than his voice.

"He probably sings well," she thought. "But will he agree?"

"Very well," he said, and walked away, chuckling and waving his arms in his own peculiar way.

That was a gay minute in his long journey from Moscow and it put him in a good humour for the rest of the evening. He was cheerful and smiling when he appeared on the stage. He moved his chair nearer the edge to be closer to the children and began reading without waiting for their shouts to subside. The cheering stopped. Tanya sat in the front row, listening attentively, filled with a sense of relief and gratitude.

The passage he had chosen was about a boy who took leave of his father. It was a bitter parting, both men going forth to do their duty. Strangely, the author's high-pitched voice that had seemed so odd to Tanya changed as he read. In it she could hear the blare of a trumpet, a ringing sound that she preferred to the whining of strings vibrating under a musician's fingers.

He finished the story, and a storm of cheer and applause swept the rows.

But Tanya did not clap. She kept her hand in the pocket of her sweater and dared not take it out. The flowers lay in her lap. She watched Alexandra Ivanovna, waiting for her to give her the signal.

When the noise subsided and the writer, closing his book, moved away from the table, Alexandra Ivanovna nodded slightly.

Tanya ran up on the stage, her hand still in her pocket. She went up to the writer briskly at first, but her steps slowed gradually and then stopped. He met her shining eyes with a gaze that was calm and unflickering.

"He's forgotten all about it," thought Tanya. "What am I going to do?"

She felt cold shivers running down her spine.

"On behalf of all the Pioneers and school children..." she began lamely.

No, he had not forgotten. He did not let her finish. Hurrying up to her, his arms outspread, he stood between her and the audience, and taking the flowers out of her clutch, placed them on the table. Then he put his arm round her and they came down from the stage together. He let no one touch her until the children had clustered around them.

"Are you a real writer, a real flesh-and-

blood one?" a little girl inquired, stepping boldly up to him.

"Yes. A real flesh-and-blood one," he replied.

"Well, I've never seen a real writer, but I don't think you look like one."

"Don't you?"

"No. I thought real writers were fat."

He bent down in front of the little girl, sinking out of sight in the crowd of children as if he were swallowed up in a growth of tall grass. They touched him and pulled at him, they shouted and shrilled and made a deafening noise. Never had fame seemed so sweet to him. For a second he held his hand over his eyes.

Tanya stood quietly at his side, almost touching his shoulder. Suddenly she felt someone tugging at her hand, trying to wrest it from its hiding-place deep in her pocket. She gave a cry and drew away.

Kolya stood beside her, gripping her hand just above the wrist and pulling it towards him with all his strength.

Tanya crooked her elbow, struggling to wrench her wrist free. But her hand went limp finally, and Kolya drew it out of her

pocket. But instead of lifting it as Tanya had expected, he squeezed it hard in both his own.

"Tanya," he said softly, "I was so afraid. I thought they'd laugh at you. But you were wonderful! And please don't be cross with me, please. I so much want to dance with you at the school party on New Year's Eve."

She could not detect any of the usual mockery in his words.

He put his hand on her shoulder as if the New Year's Eve dance had already begun and they were waltzing round the room together.

She blushed, looking at him in confusion. A tender smile lit up her face, touching her lips and showing in her eyes. Afraid no longer, her mortification forgotten, she lifted her hand and for several moments that slender, girlish, ink-stained hand rested on his shoulder.

Then suddenly Filka came up and threw his arms round them. He eyed them searchingly, and his face, usually so bland and free of care, took on a sour look.

"So you've made it up!" he said loudly.

Tanya jerked her hand from Kolya's shoulder.

"What foolish things you say, Filka!" she

said, her blush deepening. "It's simply that Kolya's asked me if he could come to my party tomorrow. I said no, but now I've changed my mind. He can come if he wants."

"Yes, I know," and Filka gave a little sigh, "tomorrow's your day. May I bring my father to the party? He wants to come."

"Yes, do," Tanya said quickly. "It'll be a nice party, I think. You'll come too, won't you, Kolya," she said, touching his sleeve.

Suddenly Filka pushed between them, separating them, and the crowd of children surged after him in an ever broadening streem

XIV

New Year's Eve always arrived in town peacefully, bringing no blizzards. The sky was sometimes clear, sometimes filmy, flaring up at the flicker of a star. Above the haze, the moon sailed along its path in a huge circle that took up half the sky.

Tanya preferred New Year's Eve to the warmest summer night. On New Year's Eve she was allowed to stay up late. It was her day. Though her birthday actually fell on a

somewhat earlier date, it was pleasant to celebrate it on a day of general rejoicing.

On New Year's Eve no one in town went to bed. The snow from the pavements was shovelled on to the road, people went visiting, and in the middle of the night songs rang out and footsteps creaked in the snow.

On that day Tanya's mother did not go to work, and Tanya, coming home from school, would shout at the door:

"Wait, don't make the pies without me!"

Her mother would be standing in the middle of the room, her hands sticky with dough. She would throw them back like two wings, and you got a sudden vision of her about to be lifted into the air. But when you looked again, there she would be, still on earth. Bending down, she would kiss Tanya's forehead and say:

"Many happy returns, dear! I hope you have a nice party. We haven't done anything yet, we waited for you."

Flinging her books on to a shelf, Tanya would wriggle hastily into her old polka-dot dress. This was not an easy thing to do, for her body, filling out during the year, would swell the dress like a favourable wind blowing out a sail.

Her mother, looking at her, would shake her head.

"My, how big you've grown!"

And despite the dough that stuck to her mother's hands, Tanya would catch them in her own and lifting her mother a little would carry her across the room.

"You'll strain yourself!" her mother would cry out in alarm.

But Tanya did not think so. Her mother was light, lighter than a sheaf of hay.

She would put her down gently and they would both look in embarrassment at Nanny who was watching them from the door.

"Mad as March hares, both of you!" the old woman would say. "You've clean forgotten the dough!"

The pleasantest hours would then begin. Tanya herself made all the good things that went on the New Year table. She crushed black poppy seeds, squeezing out a milky liquid like dandelion juice. She was in and out of the pantry all day, and how fearfully cold the pantry was! Everything, all the food stored there, was frozen and had lost all resemblance to its usual form. The meat was as hard as stone and had to be cut with a small saw; the milk had been turned into slabs and

Tanya hacked at it with a knife till it crumbled up into long, thread-like fibres and her hands were powdered with a minute, resin-like dust; the bread was grey and hoary as if with age, emanating death from every pore. But Tanya knew it to be alive. Nothing left in the pantry died there. She had only to hold the bread and meat over a fire to revive them. The meat became soft and oozed out strong juice, the milk became frothy and the bread began to breathe.

Her household tasks completed, Tanya would set out on skis for the little wood. Skiing down the gentle slope, she reached a spot where only the tops of the young firs peeked out from under the snow. Her choice always fell on the youngest tree, whose needles were a deeper blue than those of the others. She would cut it down with a sharp knife and, slinging it over her shoulders, carry it home.

It would usually be too small to be put on the floor, and she would set it up on a stool. There would be drops of resin on it, and she would chew them with relish, the smell of the resin lingering for a long time in the house.

They did not use many decorations on the tree. Its blue needles were intertwined with

gold thread that gleamed in the candlelight, silver tanks crept over the branches and bright stars floated down on parachutes. That was all.

What a happy and enjoyable day it always was! Her friends would arrive, Tanya would welcome them gladly and her mother would wind the gramophone she brought from the hospital.

There was no reason, Tanya thought, why this New Year's Eve should not be like the others. Her father was coming and, she hoped, Kolya. But would he?

"I've hurt his feelings again, I know," Tanya told herself. "Why did I do it?"

A human being was a strange creature if two words uttered by a silly boy like Filka could kill his joy, stop the warm words about to well from his heart and stay his hand, stretched out in friendship.

Tanya glanced at her shoulder where Kolya's hand had rested.

It bore no trace of the contact.

But as she turned her head, she saw her mother watching her. Her mother held Tanya's school report, a record of her progress. It was not as good as usual, but the mother

decided to say nothing about it for the present.

She looked at her daughter thoughtfully and with compassion as though she did not see the girl but, in her place, the tiny being she had once rocked on her knee.

She had on her black silk dress, she held her head very straight and the coils of hair on the nape of her neck were heavy and shining. There was no one in the world lovelier and sweeter than she.

"Why doesn't Father realize it?" thought Tanya.

Wisps of cotton clung to her mother's dress, and she puffed at them to blow them away.

"Father will soon be here," she said.

"Yes, I'm expecting him," her mother replied. "I asked Nadya to come too."

"Oh, I wish she weren't coming!" Tanya exclaimed, without thinking.

"Why not, Tanya?" her mother asked.

"We don't want her."

"But why, you foolish girl?"

Instead of replying, Tanya caught her mother round the waist and started whirling her round the fir-tree. She suspected that adults sometimes hid their thoughts just like chil-

dren did, and went on whirling her for a long time, only stopping at the sound of stamping feet on the porch.

"It's your father," said her mother with a laugh. "Stop it, Tanya."

Tanya darted into a corner.

"It's Kolya," she said, turning pale.

But the arrivals were three girls, friends of Tanya's from her Pioneer detachment, and Tanya emerged from her corner to meet them.

"Shall we be able to dance here?" asked the girls, their eyes still smarting and their faces red from the frost.

"Of course. You can do anything today!" said Tanya. "I'll turn on the gramophone."

Loud music filled the house, flooding it with sound.

Then Tanya's father arrived with Nadya. He hugged Tanya again and again to his breast and congratulated her, and Nadya gave her a pair of fur boots and a long Evenk fur coat embroidered with beads.

But Kolya was not with them.

"Where's Kolya?" her mother asked.

"He's such a stubborn boy!" said her father. "He absolutely refused to come with us.

He said he had a special gift for Tanya and would bring it himself."

The next arrivals were Filka and his family, his father, mother and three little brothers, who had all come to town in a dog-sledge.

The little boys had brown faces, and they stood before Tanya in single file and bowed low to her, for was not she their hostess! Then, one and all, they took neatly folded handkerchiefs out of their pockets and wiped their noses. Their father watched them, proud of the niceties of their conduct, while their mother calmly smoked her pipe. It was a small pipe decorated with copper nails that sparkled in the candlelight.

Everyone wanted to pick the little boys up and embrace them, and Tanya smothered them with kisses, glancing back now and then at her mother who stood arm in arm with Nadya, whose side she never left, all the evening. Tanya made several attempts to part them: first it was the fur coat that her mother must hold for her and then the boots that she must help her to pull on. But every time, her mother would smilingly pat Tanya's shoulder, go back to her place be-

side Nadya and begin talking to her again in a friendly way.

The guests were clamouring for music.

Tanya went to the gramophone, glad that she could turn her back on them all, if only for a moment.

She wound it up energetically, the sparkling black disk began to spin and the needle went circling along its furrow as diligently as a work-horse. It sang in three voices and it sang in one, and it played and played as if a whole orchestra of pipes and flutes were perched on its point like a flock of bright spirits.

Kolya did not come.

"Where can he be?" Tanya wondered, her heart wrung with anguish.

Behind her, the fir-tree and the large paper lampshade under the ceiling rocked and pitched to the stamping of the children's feet. Tanya's father joined the dancers. He was very gay and sent them into raptures over his antics.

"Just look, Tanya," her mother said to her again and again, "look at your father dancing!"

"Yes, Mummy," Tanya replied, "he dances very well."

She looked at her father, her thoughts wandering. She caught herself thinking that her father and his dancing and the general gaiety failed to hold her attention. Yet only a short time ago her heart had overflowed with both sweetness and bitterness if she so much as thought about her father. What was the matter with her? Kolya dominated all her thoughts. Where could he be? At Zhenya's house? They were having a New Year's party there too.

At this moment Tanya's thoughts were interrupted by Filka and his brothers who joined hands and began to dance. They moved softly, in an ever widening circle, barely lifting their feet from the floor. It was a favourite dance that the Evenks love to perform in the moonlight on the sandy banks of the Tugur.

At their repeated request, Tanya ran to join them. But all the time she danced, her gaze kept stealing to the door.

"That's marvellous!" her father exclaimed admiringly. "We're certainly going to enjoy ourselves today! Tanya, ask your mother for some wine. I have a surprise for you."

"You must be crazy, Father," said her mother. "You know they can't have any wine."

"I know they can't have spurge-laurel," he rejoined, "but just a drop of wine won't hurt them."

"Just a drop," the children echoed.

Nanny carried in a bottle of sweet wine on a large tray, and Frolov, a young Red Army man in a sheepskin coat, followed her in, bringing a pail. He was grinning from ear to ear.

"Frolov, old man," said Tanya's father, "show the children what we have for them."

The children rushed to the pail and looked in it, but drew back, disappointed.

"There's only snow there!" they cried.

"Not so fast, children," Frolov said, and reaching under the snow in the pail, he began taking out one orange after another. Yells of rapture greeted their appearance.

The children rushed for the oranges, but replaced them again immediately. They could hardly hold them, for the oranges were as cold and hard as a piece of metal that has been exposed to the frost for a long time.

"Wait, children, wait," said the father, laughing. "They've got to be thawed out first, then you can eat them. Believe me, they're good!"

He put an orange in cold water, and in a moment its surface was coated with a thin crust of ice, making it look like one of the shining glass balls that hung on the fir-tree. Then he broke the ice crust with his knife, shattering it into pieces, and from the fragments of melting ice on his palm the fresh, round fruit emerged. Its scent and colour seemed strange and wonderful there in the North. When Filka's baby brother got a whole orange for himself, he stood looking at it apprehensively, afraid to eat it, and Filka took his to his father.

"You eat it!" said the hunter, looking at the strange fruit without surprise. "Your friends gave it you, and it can do you no harm. Had it been smaller, I would have thought it a berry that had dropped from a rowan-tree and used it to polish my new copper pipe for it gets tarnished very quickly in the frost." He added with dignity: "Our rowan-berries grow to be quite large too."

He waved the orange away. He was old and did not care for anything that did not grow in his native forest.

Filka thrust the orange into the bosom of his jacket. He wanted to share it with Tanya, he shared everything with her—the sweet

roots he found in the forest, the sapwood of the limes, the honey of wild bees and, of course, "ant juice"!

But Tanya was nowhere to be seen. Where was she and what was wrong with her? She had been so sad today.

Filka glanced into the next room. It was dark and the beds were piled with overcoats, but Tanya was not there.

Going into the kitchen, Filka saw her in the hall, stealing towards the front door. She had put on her fur coat and was tightening the straps of her new fur boots.

Filka stepped back silently behind her, so that no one should see her.

Tanya went out on the porch. The air rose high above the ground in pillars, and became thin clouds that trailed across the luminous sky. A little cold moon shone dully through them as if through breath-dimmed glass.

Tanya walked cautiously over the snow, to stop it from crunching under her feet. A shimmering haze poured over her shoulders and face, and she ran her hand over her hair. Then, passing out of the gate, she dashed across the street to Zhenya's house, banked on all sides with snow-drifts.

She squatted in the snow awhile, ashamed

of looking in through the window. Then, climbing on to a bank of snow, she perched there, her eyes level with the pane.

The light filtering out into the street was as white and hazy as moonlight. It came from the candles burning on the fir-tree. Round the tree moved the figures of children. Their shadows drifted past the staring Tanya who thought she recognized Kolya in each figure.

Her face flamed in the frost. But she went on looking, the shadows sailing endlessly past her as though they were in a murky, watery kingdom. Only one of them all was frigid—the shadow of a huge fish with a turned-down tail—and it was darker, more solid than the others. Then it too moved. It went twisting up and down, up and down, and then came to an abrupt standstill at an angle from the window. It was clearly visible, even to the bubbles that rose from its mouth.

"What can it be?" thought Tanya in sudden panic. Then, collecting her thoughts: "Oh, that must be the goldfish in the bowl Zhenya keeps on the window-sill."

A pair of dark hands reached for the bowl, and the fish vanished. The whole magic scene

that had held Tanya spellbound disappeared. Someone's back shadowed the window.

A door slammed somewhere close at hand. Tanya crouched down quickly. She slipped from her perch and rushed away, leaping over the snow, the ice and the frozen boards of the paling.

She ran on and on without aim or purpose, roaming the streets, till her excitement was stilled and only a deep sadness remained, engulfing her being.

After a time she went back to her garden and stood near the fence, hesitating to enter the house, hiding behind the trunk of a birch-tree.

"What's come over me?" she whispered, without realizing that it was her own self she was addressing. "What's come over me? What does it all mean, tell me somebody!"

The birch-tree was silent, and only a lone spruce rustled and droned, letting the cold air unwillingly through its shaggy branches.

Filka came out on the porch and called to her softly, but she did not reply, and after looking out of the gate, he wandered back.

Only when he had disappeared inside did Tanya venture to return to the house.

The children were still dancing round her father, and Kolya was standing on a chair replacing the burnt-out candles on the fir-tree with new ones. When she saw him Tanya caught her breath, and her knees felt wobbly. Her hair was damp with hoarfrost and her clothes covered with snow.

"Where have you been, Tanya?" her father asked her anxiously.

"I went out to get a breath of air. I was dizzy."

"Why don't you go and lie down on my bed?" suggested her mother.

Kolya jumped down from his chair and went up to Tanya.

"Wait," he said, "I want to show you my present. I got it from a Chinese I know, and I had to go a long way to get it."

First he brought out a whole heap of worms, long, red worms, redder than the berries of the sweetbrier in the forest, and these she placed on the stove-ledge where the wood was drying. Then he showed her a small glass bowl with a goldfish in it. It was a large fish with a drooping tail that looked like a long skirt. The fish was almost too big for the transparent walls that held it prisoner, and it kept bumping against the glass.

Green fronds floated on the water's surface.

"You needn't have gone to all that trouble," Tanya said. "I'm not like Zhenya. I don't keep fish in glass tanks on my window. We'll have to fry it."

Kolya knitted his brows, and his eyes grew dark and impenetrable. He did not seem to have heard what Tanya said. But his hands went limp, the bowl swayed and the fish floated up with a splash of its tail. Several drops of water spilled over the edge on to the floor.

He went up to Nanny who had been standing at the door all evening, and said:

"Please, Nurse, Tanya wants you to fry this fish for her, and some potatoes too."

"Yes," Tanya urged, "do fry it, Nanny. It ought to be very good, like carp. It belongs to the carp family."

She came up to her father and took his hands in hers.

"Daddy, you and I are going to dance a lot together, you dance so well," she said, rising on tiptoe and passing her arm around his shoulder. And her feet which had just run over snowy hills and plains, began to move again—over the polished floor.

She held her head tilted back a little as she danced, and whenever she grew tired she would bend down and press her forehead against her father's sleeve. His arms rocked her gently, and she swayed this way and that like river grass growing in gentle currents. Her father was happy. He smiled. He was rewarded at last for all his efforts that he feared had been vain and fruitless, for his generous gifts, for the gay dancing, the iced oranges and the wine he had allowed the children to have.

Tanya's mother was radiant too. She moved happily amid her guests, and though her manner was reserved, her face was full of animation; even her voice was different.

Tanya danced with her and with Nadya and when at last she grew tired, stopped for a rest in a quiet corner of the room behind the gayly decked tree.

Filka, a forlorn look on his face, stood beside her by the window. She had forgotten all about him, had not said a word to him all the evening.

He called her name once, and then again, and she turned her absent gaze on him.

"Someone's going to the skating-rink with Kolya tomorrow," said Filka.

"You, I suppose?" Tanya asked.

Filka shook his head.

"Who, then?"

"Zhenya."

"Oh."

Tanya clutched at the tree. It swayed and a silver ball dropped to the floor and broke. Tanya trod on the pieces of glass.

"What else did Kolya ask you to tell me?"

But Filka was beginning to feel sorry for her.

His face, as dark as his father's and brothers', shone in the candlelight.

"I can eat a candle," he said.

Tanya looked at him silently. Filka was as good as his word. He took a lighted candle from the tree, blew out the flame and bit in.

Tanya came to her senses with a jolt.

"What are you doing, Filka!" she cried. "You'll be sick!"

"No, I won't," said Filka. "It's not very tasty, but it isn't going to make me sick. And it's funny, isn't it?"

It *was* funny, and Tanya had to laugh.

Tears glittered suddenly like tiny lights in Filka's heavy-lidded eyes. He chewed energetically.

"Why does he look as if he were crying?" Tanya wondered.

She glanced round, but saw nothing that could have made Filka cry. But perhaps the tiny candles tasted very bitter?

She wrenched the candle out of his hand.

"You'll make yourself ill, Filka," she said. "And I wanted to go to the school concert with you tomorrow morning. Why must you set the children such a bad example? Look."

Beside them one of Filka's little brothers stood nibbling a candle and, unlike Filka, he seemed to like it. His face with its prominent cheek-bones expressed a full measure of enjoyment. He still held his orange in his hand.

XV

After midnight the visitors went home and Tanya wished them all, her best and second-best girl-friends, Filka and his father, her own father, Nadya and everyone else, a very happy New Year. To Kolya she said:

"Happy New Year, Kolya! I hope you'll be very happy, and let's forget about that silly fish."

She resolved not to think about him any more.

But in the middle of the night she woke up, frightened, to hear a mosquito singing in her ear. She supposed it was a young mosquito, hatched from the grub that she had left on the stove-ledge the other day, or an old one, perhaps, that had been revived by the warmth. It was positively terrifying to hear it drone in the middle of the winter night when it had no business to be there at all.

Tanya sat up in bed, staring into the darkness and listening to that melodious drone, and her heart pounded as loudly as a night watchman's rattle.

Why had the mosquito's wretched little song frightened her so?

"I ought to kill it," she thought.

But the mosquito only buzzed for a little while more and then stopped. Its life had run out without Tanya's help.

Tanya went back to sleep again and woke up in the morning, feeling refreshed and happy.

Her mother had already left for the hospital, but even this did not dampen her spirits. Her heart brimmed with a happy and content-

ed feeling and her body felt exceptionally light.

"What makes me feel like this?" she asked herself. "Is it the vacation? Or am I in love? Zhenya is always talking about love. So shamelessly too. Well, all right, I don't mind being in love. And today at the party I'm going to dance with Kolya just the same. And I'll go to the skating-rink. I won't be in their way at all. I'll stand behind a snow-drift and watch them skate. And if a strap on his skate comes undone, I'll tie it for him. With my own hands. Yes, that's what I'll do."

These thoughts raced through Tanya's head while she washed and had her breakfast. Her eyes shone, and her every movement seemed a new and delightful experience.

She sharpened her skates, bound them firmly with straps, and throwing Tiger a piece of sugar, called to him to follow her.

Tiger nosed about in the snow, but he had lost his sense of smell and soon had to give up his search for the sugar. But he did go with Tanya, which—as he reasoned out some time later, for he was old and slow-witted—was a vain sacrifice.

They spent a whole hour by the rink, hiding

behind the drifts, but they saw no one, no one at all. And what they saw on the river below seemed fraught with danger.

In the distance, from beyond the tree-covered promontory, the wind crept up, brushing lightly against the cliffs and hissing as it whipped the snow from the rocks.

Tanya and her dog stood there a long time and then they started back.

They had just reached the top of the path behind the fishermen's huts when they saw Kolya. Zhenya was with him, and he was helping her to slide down the icy patches that the feet of the fishermen's children had polished to a slippery hardness. Both held their skates in their hands.

Tanya turned into a side-street and hid behind a house, thrusting her skates into a snowbank. Tiger squatted beside her, looking up into her face. He could not understand what was going on.

Kolya passed them without seeing them, but Tanya did not move. Tiger whimpered a little and his paws began to tremble. He recalled the smell of the chicken-bones that Kolya often brought for him, and his conscience gave him a pang. He rushed out yelp-

ing from his hiding-place and bounded after Kolya who swung round quickly.

"You here, Tiger?" he said in surprise "And where's Tanya?"

Tanya was there too. She had come out from behind the house and stood before him. It was no use trying to hide any more. Her face was flushed a deep red, too deep to have been achieved by the eastern wind that had been blowing ever since morning.

"Come here at once, Tiger!" she commanded.

Kolya waved to her and came towards her, swinging his skates.

"So you've been skating," he said. "And I thought you'd gone with Filka to the school concert."

Tanya stood without moving, her face averted. She spoke in a high-handed manner, but had difficulty in making her tongue obey her.

"I haven't been skating at all," she said. "Can't you see I haven't got my skates with me! And it's true about Filka and me. We *are* going to the school concert together."

Kolya looked at her, and seeing no skates in her hands or over her shoulder, said:

"So it's true! Very good! Come here, Tiger!"

"Don't move, Tiger!" Tanya shouted, and the old dog stayed where he was, although his head was filled with the thought of luscious chicken-bones.

He sat beside Tanya a little longer, trying, perhaps, to think of a way out of his predicament. Then, apparently recalling some urgent need of his own, he started up and rushed back into the side-street. Tanya went after him quickly, trying hard not to look back.

"I'll never hide from Kolya again behind houses or snow-drifts," she thought. "And I'll never tie his skate strap for him, it's no use trying to do anything like that ever again."

Tanya had her whole life ahead of her, but she resolved never to think about Kolya again, to banish the very memory of him from her mind. For were not there other joys in life, greater than this and less burdensome!

She had known some of them only a short while ago. They were simple joys. Fishing for trout in the river was one, and standing abreast of one's friends at roll-call, listening to the shrill of the bugle, another. Her friends! Even now Filka must be waiting for her at school, and some of the others were certainly crowding at the gate.

And how she had loved gazing idly around her without a thought in her head, looking over the town where she had been born and which in itself was a source of joy.

It was small but, like herself, friendly with the sky and the dark, evergreen forests. In spring, the eagles gazed at its beauty in wonder from the dizzy heights overhead, and even now, in winter, it was beautiful. Not all its houses were wooden ones: the embankment, the school and the new building in which gold was smelted were all made of stone. It had many new roads, running in and out of the surrounding woodlands, and day and night, from deep in the forest came the snorting of engines and smoke coiled over the crowns of the cedars. There was quite a lot of traffic on the roads, and the cars had chains on their wheels to stop them from skidding.

There too was the old tin-smith who went from house to house, stopping at street corners to shout: "Pots and pans tinned and soldered!" In spring, he carried his metal bar over his shoulder, but in winter he tied a rope to it and pulled it behind him over the snow. It skidded after him like a dog.

The slippery snow was good for some things and bad for others, and there was just nothing to be done about it.

Tanya watched the tin-smith as he walked on beating on his metal bar. Then, quickening her step, she hurried to the school.

The school gate stood ajar, and, strangely enough, most of the children were pouring out into the street instead of coming in. They ran toward Tanya shouting something, but at first she could not make out what it was.

"A blizzard's coming!" they cried. "A blizzard! There won't be any concert!"

The parents of some of the smaller children had come to take them home.

Alexandra Ivanovna walked out of the gate with two children, a small girl, the very small girl whose nimble feet had crossed Tanya's path so often, and a small boy who seemed reluctant to go anywhere at all.

Tanya glanced round her and then up at the sky which was cleft into two parts, one blue and the other black. The black part was on Tanya's left, to the east, and seemed to form one dense, straight wall, and over the watch-tower the flag blowing out in the wind was as straight as a string.

The blizzard was moving over the town, but

it was still high overhead and had not yet touched the ground.

Tanya peered up at the sky through her fingers. It was getting darker and darker.

"The storm will be here any minute now, and those two are out on the river," she thought with a stab of anxiety.

"A blizzard's blowing up!" Alexandra Ivanovna shouted. "Go home, Tanya, and tell everyone you meet to do the same."

But Tanya did not turn back.

"I'm not afraid of a blizzard," she said, "and I'd like to help you. Let me take the little girl home."

"She lives a long way off, by the river, near the barges."

"That's all right. I know where the house is."

"Very well then. You can take her, and I'll take the boy. And get back home as quickly as you can," she added nervously.

"I'll be all right," Tanya hastened to assure her. "Don't worry, Alexandra Ivanovna."

She took the little girl's hand, and the two of them started off at a run down the long street. It was only noon, but housewives were already closing the shutters and lighting the lamps.

The girls ran very fast, without stopping,

only held up by the wind at the crossings. Halting on top of the hill overlooking the river, they saw the barges covered with high drifts of snow. To their right lay the large skating-rink, where the ice had been cleared of snow. Garlands of spruce branches hung from the tall poles that marked its boundaries. They dangled there like the rigging on a schooner caught in a storm at sea. Far beyond the rink, on the river and on the bare tops of the mountains, dancing white whirlwinds rose on their tapering spindles like long-stemmed flowers. There was no one on the rink save for two tiny figures skating hand in hand.

Tanya dashed down the path and along the bank, looking now at the rink and now at the little girl at her side who was quite out of breath.

She stopped to give her a moment's rest.

"Those two are from our school," said the little girl. "Why don't you call to them?"

But Tanya, instead of replying, took the child's hand and put it to her heart.

"Can you hear it?" she asked.

"My ears are frozen, I can't hear a thing," said the little girl. "There's a blizzard coming, and they're skating. Why don't you warn them?"

But again Tanya made no reply. She lifted up the child and carried her into a cottage on the edge of the bank.

In a moment she reappeared at the door, without the little girl. She jumped down on to the ice and made her way between the barges along a path where the snow was so deep that her feet kept sinking in it up to her ankles. She could not hope to walk very fast through such drifts and decided not to hurry whatever happened—not even if the storm blinded her, not even if the snow buried the rink and the garlands and the river right up to the very mountains. She would get to the rink and tell them sharply:

"It's time you came to your senses and went home. But don't think I came specially to tell you. I was taking one of the little girls home and happened to be passing. It was just your good luck, because I can see that you have forgotten all about everything. And there's another reason why I'm here, besides. It's because I like walking on the river before a storm. You don't have to believe me if you don't want to. I walked here slowly and I'll go back slowly, I won't hurry the least little bit. . . ."

Tanya went on muttering to herself in this strain, unaware that she was walking faster

and faster till her feet seemed to bear her forward like wings. She tore past the frozen barges, the dark air droning in her ears. She had taken a short cut, and it soon brought her to the rink. She stopped short, surprised to find no one there. Her gaze swept over the river and the bank, that was partly veiled with mist. Suddenly, quite close to her, almost at her feet, she saw Kolya. He sat on the snow near some spruce garlands that the wind had swept to the ground, and Zhenya sat beside him. Overhead, the haze was creeping ominously near the sun.

Breasting the boughs, Tanya broke savagely through a growth of spruces and reached Kolya's side.

"Are you two blind?" she said, looking at Zhenya. "There's going to be a blizzard. Alexandra Ivanovna said everyone was to go home."

But as she brought this out, she saw that Zhenya was badly frightened: her cheeks were flushed and she was trembling all over.

"What's the matter?" asked Tanya, in alarm.

"It was all Kolya's fault," said Zhenya, in a shaky voice. "He wanted to go skating with me. I'm frightened, there's such a terrible wind."

"Stop lying," Kolya said. "You were the one that wanted to go skating this morning."

"And didn't you ask Filka to tell Tanya we would be here?" Zhenya retorted crossly.

But Tanya, bending anxiously over Kolya, did not listen.

Kolya's face was pale and he clutched his leg. He seemed unable to lift himself up from the snow.

"Go away, silly," he said to Zhenya. "Go away, both of you. I'll stay here alone."

Zhenya could not control her trembling.

"I'm going home," she declared.

Tanya grasped her by the shoulders and turned her gently toward the town.

"All right, go," she said. "Only, please drop in at Filka's on your way and tell him we're here. My mother's out."

"No, no, I'm going straight home. I'm frightened. The storm will break any moment now." And Zhenya stumbled up the mountain, shielding her face from the wind with her coat sleeve.

Tanya squatted down on the ice in front of Kolya and began undoing his skate straps.

"Have you hurt yourself? Is it very painful?" she asked him.

He made no reply.

The darkness dropped down around them, swallowing up the river, the ice and the sky.

Tanya's fingers were stiff with the cold, and from time to time she squeezed them between her knees to warm them. Kolya tried not to groan. Tanya held out her hand to him, and grasping it, he attempted to get up, but sank back on the snow again immediately.

"Is it broken?" Tanya asked him, frightened.

"No, I sprained it, that's all. That foolish Zhenya can't skate at all."

He laughed, rather unexpectedly under the circumstances.

Was he laughing at her, Tanya wondered, because she was so anxious about him? Perhaps he was just bluffing and there was nothing wrong with his leg!

"Look," he said with a laugh, pointing at the road. "There's Tiger, with your skates in his mouth. I knew you'd hidden them."

She looked along the road and saw Tiger trotting over the ice toward them, dragging her skates by their straps. He was soon beside them and, dropping the skates at her feet, he squatted in the snow, waiting for her approval. Tanya passed her frost-numbed hand over his stiff fur. He must have dug the skates out of

the snowbank behind the house, and he had dragged them along the street, shying away from passers-by, the strong wind pitching him over into the snow. He had had a hard time, and it had all been for nothing, for what use were the skates now!

"What ever shall I do?" she said. "Mother's not at home. We've only got Tiger. Well, you can't walk, so I'll have to carry you as far as the fishermen's huts. You can't stay here. You don't know what our storms are like."

"I'm not afraid of your old storm," Kolya replied obstinately. "And if you think I was afraid of your old river and of wading in after that miserable little kitten—well, that's your business, you can think what you like. And you can go if you're scared."

"No," Tanya said. "I'm not afraid of the storm, but I *am* worried about you, I know how dangerous it is, and I won't leave you." And she sat down in the snow beside him, gazing at him with a tenderness she no longer cared to conceal. Her face was troubled.

Kolya dropped his head.

"I ought to be home," he said. "I promised Father I'd be back early. He doesn't know where I am."

"What ever shall I do?" Tanya repeated. Turning her gaze from Kolya, she glanced pensively at Tiger. As the dog stood there in the whirling snow, his body trembled all over. Tanya jumped to her feet, more cheerful now than before.

The sky crept down the mountains and hung like smoke in the gorges. The distant blackness drew near, pausing beyond the cliffs. But the full strength of the wind had not yet emerged from behind the sandy, rock-strewn spit, nor had snow begun to fall. The storm was biding its time.

"We have time," Tanya said. "Filka has a pack of dogs, and I'm quite good at handling them. I'll go and get them, and we may still make it before the storm breaks. Wait for me here, and I'll take you safely home to Father. Don't be afraid. Tiger will stay with you. He won't leave you."

Tanya coaxed Tiger on to a snowbank and gave him her hand to lick. Then she moved away, and he stayed where he was, looking apprehensively into the distance where the wind was whipping up the snow and rocking the forests on the mountains.

Tanya rushed up the bank.

Her head bent, her body cleaving the wind, she ran along a street piled high with snowdrifts. All the gates were closed and only Filka's stood ajar. He had just arrived with his father in a dog-sledge and was on the porch brushing the snow from his skis. Seeing Tanya gasping for breath beside him, he stepped back, amazed. The dogs were still harnessed to the sledge and lay in the yard by the gate. The *kayur*, a long staff of ashwood, was beside them, sticking out of the snow.

Tanya wrenched it out and flung herself on to the sledge.

"What are you doing, Tanya!" Filka cried out in fright. "Watch out! The dogs are dangerous!"

"I know," said Tanya, "I know, Filka dear! But I've got to get Kolya home at once. He sprained his ankle skating on the rink. I'll bring your dogs right back. It isn't far, I'll go by the river."

She waved the *kayur*, gave a shout in the Nanai language, and the dogs bore her swiftly through the gate.

By the time Filka had leaped from the porch and slipped into his skis, the sledge was far away. But he ran after it, shouting at the top of his lungs:

"There's a blizzard coming! Where are you going? Wait for me!"

His cries did not reach Tanya.

She sat astride the sledge, like a real hunter, holding the *kayur* in readiness and steering skilfully. Oddly enough, though her voice was strange to them, the dogs obeyed her.

Filka stopped, and the wind stabbed him in the shoulders, pinning him to the ground. But he did not turn back. He sat crouched on his skis, thinking about what had occurred, about the wind and about Tanya and himself. Finally he swung round abruptly and turned down a road that led to the fortress, his face lashed by the wind.

Meanwhile his dogs had carried Tanya swiftly out on to the rink. Plunging the *kayur* violently between the runners, she drew the sledge to a stop beside Kolya, and at once the dogs stretched themselves out peacefully on the snow.

Kolya staggered to his feet, smiling despite the pain. His frost-nipped face shone with pleasure, for this was the first time he had ever seen a sledge drawn by dogs.

"Not at all a bad idea, that!" he said, looking at the light sledge lined with whalebone and at the dock-tailed dogs who were licking

the snow. "The dogs are not as bad-tempered as Filka makes out. They don't look so very strong either. They're only a little bigger than our Pomeranians."

But Tanya, who knew much better just how bad-tempered they were, how ungovernable and how impatient to be free, stayed right beside the sledge. Once, and then only for a moment, did she leave it to catch Kolya gently up under the arms and settle him in the seat. Then she lifted Tiger, who was trembling with fear, squeezed him to her breast and jumped on to the sledge, shouting to the dogs to start. Her movements were sure, and her eyes sharp as they watched the road where the snow had begun hissing and curling. But she became timid and shy whenever she glanced back at Kolya.

"Does it hurt very much?" she asked him. "Bear up, we'll soon be home. If only we can beat the blizzard."

He was astonished. He looked at her eyes, fringed with lashes hoary from the snow. They gleamed with a look of anxiety and in her whole being he sensed the presence of something new, strange, utterly different. It was as if through the clouds of hard, stinging snow that scratched their cheeks as it fell, they were

both being borne in a light sledge drawn by a team of wild dogs to a strange, unknown land about which he had never heard.

And he stopped himself from falling off the sledge by clinging to her coat.

The blizzard invaded the road. It advanced in a thick wall like a tropical shower, quenching the light and ringing like thunder amid cliffs.

Tanya, deafened by the wind, saw the dim outlines of a horse galloping madly towards them along the road as though it were trying to tear itself away from the pursuing white wall. Who rode in the sledge behind it she could not see, but feeling the dogs wrench forward furiously, she gave a cry of warning.

Kolya did not know what had made her scream so wildly, but Tanya knew only too well: the dogs obeyed her no longer.

She brandished the *kayur* like a heavy lance and, throwing all her weight into her arm, plunged it violently into the snow. It went in deep and broke. Then she turned, and Kolya had a momentary glimpse of her face distorted with terror.

"Hold tight!" she shouted.

Lifting Tiger high over her head, she flung him out on to the road. He fell, protesting, into

the snow. Then he seemed to guess what he had to do. He sprang up at once and raced alongside the dog team, barking furiously. He shot ahead of them, as if to precipitate his own doom. The dogs noticed him, and as he flung himself off the road, tore after him in pursuit.

The horse galloped by.

"My poor, my darling Tiger!" thought Tanya.

He was taking huge leaps over the untouched snow of the field, plunging, sinking, gasping for breath. Perhaps he cursed fate for making his legs short and his neck long and weak. But he loved this girl. He had played with her when he was a puppy and they had grown up together. Yet life was unfair—of the two, only he had aged.

He squatted in the snow and waited for death.

And Tanya clutched convulsively at the sledge as she heard his prolonged squeal, the rattle in his throat and the snapping of the dogs' fangs that drowned the howling of the wind.

The sledge, unrestrained by brakes, crashed into the clustering pack, flew into the air and turned a somersault.

Tanya gripped a runner. Lightning flashed

in her head. For an instant she was blinded. The tow rope, caught round the edge of a sharp hummock, snapped with a serpent-like hiss, and, free from the harness, the dogs dashed off into the blizzard.

They lay without stirring, all three of them: Tanya, stretched out beside the sledge, Kolya, who had thrown himself flat on the ground, and Tiger, his throat torn, staring with dead eyes at the storm-ridden sky.

All was still except the whistling snow and the wind that rushed about over the river in powerful gusts.

Tanya was the first to jump to her feet. She righted the sledge and then bent down again to help Kolya. The fall had not stunned her. All her movements were as swift, strong and sure as before. Calmly, as if no misfortune had occurred, she brushed the snow from her face.

But Kolya's knees buckled under him.

"We're lost. What have I done, Tanya!" he said in fright. Tears filled his eyes and froze on his lashes. His body sagged, and he would have fallen if Tanya had not caught him.

"Kolya, dear!" she cried. "We won't die, we'll be all right. Only we can't stay in one place or we'll be snowed up. We must keep moving! Can you hear me, Kolya?"

She strained every muscle to keep him on his feet. Her arm was about him, and they stood as if locked in an embrace, the blizzard shrouding them for a moment in its snowy folds and then deafening them with its thunderous roar.

Tanya pushed the sledge nearer with her foot.

"No! No!" Kolya cried. "I won't let you tow me! I'm no baby!"

He began struggling to get out of her grip.

Tanya caught him round the neck, and their cold faces touched. She began pleading with him, saying the same words over and over again, even though every word was an effort, for the wind drowned every sound that formed on her lips.

"We'll get there! We can make it!" she repeated. "It isn't far. Hurry! We mustn't lose a moment."

He was persuaded finally and let himself down on to the sledge. Brushing the snow from his face with her scarf, Tanya examined his hands—they were still dry—and tightened the strings of his mittens at his wrists.

Then, gripping the broken end of rope, she began to stumble forward, pulling the sledge after her. Swelling waves of snow rolled towards her in drifts that barred her path.

Struggling up them to the top, stumbling down again, she made her way forward, leaning over against the swirling haze that clung tenaciously to her clothing like the burrs of a trailing plant. The air was dark, packed with snow and impenetrable.

Sometimes Tanya would stop, go round to the sledge, shake Kolya to make him get up and, deaf to his groans and pleas, force him to walk a few steps. She was gasping for breath, her face was wet and her clothing crusted with ice.

She had no idea where the town was. The river-bank, the sky—everything had vanished, swallowed up in the milky haze. But she plodded on, oblivious of time, her head bent down, her feet groping for the path and the sweat pouring down her back as if it were the height of summer.

Suddenly the air was rent by gun-fire.

Pulling off her fur cap, Tanya stopped to listen. Then, running to Kolya's side, she coaxed him to his feet.

Forcing the sounds from her throat, she began to shout, but her cries seemed no louder to her than the rustling of dry snow-flakes.

"Did you hear that, Kolya?" she asked. "That was the fortress gun. They must be trying to find us."

He nodded his head listlessly, for a growing torpor was creeping over him.

She decided to abandon the sledge. Clasping him round the waist and placing his arm round her neck, she began dragging him along, making him move his feet as they went.

They turned left, and heard a second shot. It was louder than the first and echoed over the river.

Tanya forged ahead, breasting the wind. She blessed the strength of her lungs that made it possible for her to breathe in this terrible storm, the strength of her legs that carried her onward and the strength of her arms that held her friend so firmly. But now and then a momentary fear gripped her, and she felt that she was all alone in a world of wind and snow.

In the meantime frontier guards were skiing towards them through the blizzard. They moved in a close chain spread far out over the river, joined together by a long rope. Thus they faced the blizzard without fear. The same thick haze, the same hummocks, the same high, rolling banks of snow rose before them, but the men surmounted them easily, wasting no breath, and when the wind was particularly fierce, they bent down as if to slip past beneath the driving gusts.

Gradually they neared the spot where Tanya was, but not even when they had come within two steps of her could they see her or she them. For all she knew, she was facing the blizzard alone, Kolya hanging limp on her arm. The drops of sweat on her face had turned to ice, she had no strength left and every blast of wind sent her reeling and falling to the ground. Each time she struggled back to her feet and staggered on, reaching out with her free hand.

Suddenly her elbow brushed against something that felt like a rope. She clutched at it convulsively. It must, she thought, belong to one of the barges frozen into the ice near by, but as she ran her hand over it, she could not restrain a cry for help. Unexpectedly, her fingers touched her father's greatcoat. There were no visual signs to warn her of his presence; her snow-blinded eyes and her frost-numbed fingers could not help her; but her warm heart that had sought him for so long told her that he was here beside her, in this haze, this darkness, this cold desert that threatened her with death and extinction.

"Daddy! Daddy!" she cried.

"I'm here!" came his answer.

Her face, weary and twisted with pain, was suddenly bathed in tears.

"He's alive," she said, pushing Kolya toward her father, and, her body shaken by loud sobs, she threw herself at his knees, pressing her forehead against them.

He squatted down in the snow and, tearing off his greatcoat, wrapped it round the two children who snuggled up against him.

What had come over him? He too seemed to be weeping, and his face, distorted by suffering like Tanya's, was wet. Was it tears or melting snow that ran down under his warm cap?

"Filka told us," he said.

"Filka... Filka..." Tanya repeated loudly.

For a minute or two they stayed there without moving, the snow piling up around them. Then Tanya's father gave the rope a tug. And at once to his right and left Red Army men began to emerge one by one from out of the blizzard like white clouds of snow. Not for a moment did they loosen their hold on the rope.

The last to appear was Frolov. The blizzard had covered him in snow from head to foot, even to the rifle slung over his shoulder.

"We've found them," he said. "I told you we would. We had to."

The men crowded around the colonel and his two children, and then they all began ploughing their way back through the blizzard.

A last shot came from the fortress.

XVI

The day when Tanya had fought a winning battle for her life against the storm and blizzard slipped into the past. She had fought bravely, and it had been a double triumph, for on that day her father had found the long-lost road back to her heart. He had found it unguided and he had warmed her heart with his love.

By morning the wind had changed and was not to blow again for a long time.

A stillness fell over the river, over the mountains, over Tanya's whole world. The wind had swept the snow from the cedars and the spruces, and the forests were dark again. When Tanya looked at them her gaze was calm. No longer did it wander off to seek new sights and unknown places.

Kolya's ears and cheeks had been slightly frost-bitten during the storm and he was not allowed to go out, but Tanya and Filka visited him daily and often stayed for dinner.

Dinner with her father's family was no longer the ordeal it once had been for Tanya. Her father did not press her so insistently to eat cherry pie. Nadya's kiss of welcome at the door was less exaggerated, and even the bread seemed sweeter.

Her father's leather belt, lying about on the sofa, as usual, seemed different too, and Tanya would often tie it round her own waist.

Never before had she been so happy.

But holidays cannot last for ever, and Tanya had been back at school for several days now.

She liked to carry her books under her arm, refusing to use a satchel, and before taking off her coat in the cloak-room she would throw them on the table under the big mirror.

On that day, she flung down her books as usual and, slipping one arm out of her coat, glanced in the mirror—something she generally avoided doing because it was the very same mirror that had once punished her so cruelly.

But she did not look at her own face or eyes, in whose depths soft shadows played, but at something that seemed to have no connection with herself.

She watched a crowd of children, standing behind her in a semicircle, their backs to the mirror and their heads thrown back. They were reading a newspaper in a wall frame of wire netting.

Zhenya, who stood nearest the wall, said:

"She should be expelled from our group for this."

"Yes. She should be thrown out," agreed the fat boy who had arrived in town on the same day as Kolya.

Tanya did not understand to whom these words referred, and she made no move to come any nearer. It was not until several minutes later that she joined the group and recognized the newspaper. It was the district paper to which the group subscribed.

"What's up?" she asked.

At the sound of her voice, the children swung round to look at her, but turned away again at once, without a word. Tanya, always a favourite among her classmates, was taken aback.

"What does it mean?" she exclaimed.

No one replied.

She lifted her hand to the wire frame that was closed with a padlock and read:

"*School Life.* Disgraceful goings-on have been allowed to take place at School No. 2. Tanya Sabaneyeva, a student of the seventh form, is reported to have taken her classmate Kolya Sabaneyev riding in a dog-sledge during the recent blizzard. As a result, Kolya had to spend the rest of his vacation in bed. Another boy from the same class, Filka Belolyubsky, who ran to the fortress to warn Kolya's father about the ride, had a finger frost-bitten. The children were rescued by frontier guards. What can the teaching staff and Pioneer organization be thinking of to permit such a gross violation of discipline?"

"What does it mean?" Tanya softly repeated.

Glancing round her, she saw no one beside her but Filka, who was drawn up to his full height.

Suddenly she knew what it meant. She understood that cold winds can blow from all sides, that they can penetrate the thickest walls even into a warm house and knock you off your feet.

She dropped her arms. Her coat slipped from her shoulders and fell to the floor. She did not pick it up.

"Not a word of it is true, Filka," she whispered.

"Of course not," he whispered back, and showing her his bandaged finger, he added: "It doesn't hurt a bit. What they thought up there I do not know. But listen to me. Do listen to me, Tanya."

Tanya's lips were parted and she was gasping for breath, taking gulps of air that seemed to her sharper, more overpowering than the fiercest storm on the river. Hearing nothing, seeing nothing, she said:

"What will become of me now?"

Then, clutching her head with her hands, she ran out of the room, seeking, as she always did, to find solace and a solution in vigorous movement.

Walking with long strides, as one does in dreams, she went along the corridor, knocking her shoulder against the wall and bumping into the children playing there who ran squealing out of her way. Turning the corner, she passed an old man who waved a wooden pointer at her, but, although he was the head master, she did not say good-morning. The

old man looked sadly after her and shook his head and then glanced at Aristarkh Aristarkhovich Aristarkhov, the history teacher, who was on duty in the corridor.

"Yes, that's the girl," said Aristarkh Aristarkhovich, "and I'm not at all sorry that I informed the paper about that incident."

Tanya walked on along the corridor, and the tumultuous beating of her heart broke through the clamour of children's voices that drowned out every other sound. What was she to do? Some catastrophe was always happening to her.

"Where are all my friends?" she thought.

It did not occur to her that she was the one who was running away from them.

XVII

No one knew better than Filka that he had only thought of helping Tanya, but he found neither his own conduct on that day nor the conduct of his friends satisfying.

His first impulse had been to rush down the corridor after Tanya. But when he saw Aristarkh Aristarkhovich Aristarkhov with his lifted shoulders, dispassionate spectacles and

his hands that seemed to take up too much space, he paused in his tracks and decided, against his better judgement, to go back.

But he saw nothing in the cloak-room to comfort him. In the shadows between the coat-pegs the children still clustered by the newspaper on the wall. Tanya's school-books had been pushed from the table to the floor, beside the fur coat that her father had given her. It was being trampled underfoot, and no one had a thought for its fine decoration of cloth and beads or for its trimming of badger fur that had the sheen and lustre of silk.

Filka, who had sunk, as was sometimes his wont, into a reflective mood, told himself that if the warriors of old—and those of today too, with their red-starred cloth helmets—did not help each other when they were on the march, then they could not hope to attain victory; that if your friends only remembered you while you were in their presence and forgot about you as soon as you went off on a journey, then you could never hope to find the road back; and that if a hunter who had lost his knife in the forest could not trust the first man he met enough to ask him if he had found it, then he could never, alone as he was, sleep calmly in the forest.

And Filka dropped on his knees on the dusty floor among the thronging children. They trod on his fingers, but he managed to collect Tanya's books and, grasping her coat, tried with all his might to pull it out from under the children's heels. But this was not an easy thing to do, for a pair of felt boots was firmly planted on it, not yielding an inch. The boots belonged to the fat boy whom Tanya had always thought rather a bad lot and who now stood facing Kolya and shouting:

"I shall repeat it a thousand times. Yes, I shall. Your Tanya ought to be thrown out of the group!"

Kolya, very pale and still wearing the warm fur cap he had not had time to remove, looked at him silently. Rage took his breath away, and he said softly:

"Say another word about her, and I don't care if you are fat, I'll pick you up like a puppy by the scruff of your neck and throw you out!"

"You think *you* can pick me up?" the fat boy said with a loud laugh. "Why, you couldn't budge me from the spot!"

The fat boy had good grounds for his scepticism, for Kolya, weak after his illness, could not carry out his threat. In fact, he could do

little more than clasp his opponent round the chest. The fat boy raised his fist and was about to punch Kolya, when Filka, putting his thoughts aside for the moment, jerked out his hand, very firm and strong from his habit of climbing trees, and struck him with the side of his palm just below the knees, sending him sprawling across the floor.

When he had in this way staved off the blow aimed at Kolya, Filka quickly snatched up Tanya's coat and, after carefully brushing off the dust, hung it up on a peg. These two important deeds accomplished, he wasted no time in setting about a third. He went over to the fat boy, somewhat stunned by his fall, and pulled him up by the shoulders, to set him gently on his feet. Then he lifted his frost-bitten finger in the loose and dirty bandage, and shook it threateningly.

"You're a stranger to our town and to this school," he said, "but do try to be a man, just once. Believe me, I'll make a man of you if it's the last thing I do!"

He brought this out just in time, for looking up, he saw Aristarkh Aristarkhovich Aristarkhov standing beside them.

For once the history teacher's hands were hanging straight down and did not take up

much room. With him were Kostya, the Young Pioneer leader, and the head master, a kindly and likeable old man.

"Find Tatyana Sabaneyeva at once and send her to me," ordered Aristarkh Aristarkhovich in harsh tones.

The fat boy and Filka exchanged a look, and then they both looked at Kolya. After that the three of them dropped their eyes. They no longer had the slightest desire to fight or quarrel with each other.

"We don't know where she is, we haven't seen her anywhere," they said. "So how can we send her to you, Aristarkh Aristarkhovich?"

And linking their arms together, they strode off down the corridor, taking up its entire width, singing a popular song in low tones:

Be fearless, friends, you are not alone,
Grenada, Grenada, Grenada my own....

XVIII

They went on singing the song for the rest of the morning, but Tanya did not appear in class, and when, at the end of school, there was

still no sign of her, the song died on their lips. They sat through the last lesson very quietly, their attention wandering and their pens dropping from their hands.

Alexandra Ivanovna too was quiet and preoccupied. Her lovely face, usually so gay, wore an anxious look, and the little star on her dress seemed to have become dim.

"Where is Tanya? Where did she go? School is nearly over, and there's not a sign of her here or at home. Can't we find her, children?" she appealed to them again and again. "Surely some of you are her friends. Or aren't you?"

When classes are over, the hushed and empty school is an odd place. The noise dies down as suddenly as the patter of rain which has passed abruptly over a forest, leaving the leaves of the aspen still trembling with the weight of the raindrops, while silence already stalks amid the spruces. The stillness is complete but for a child's voice that tinkles out suddenly at the end of the corridor like the last raindrop, or the rapid patter of someone's feet rushing over the tiles like wind over rocks.

But today the footsteps were interminable! The children walked up and down the corridor, and they flocked out into the yard, going round the snow sentinel that Tanya had made

so well. The damp wind had eaten away his shoulders, and icicles hung from his helmet, but he still gazed at the distance where he seemed to see an angry sea.

"Perhaps, she went down to the river again," Kolya said to Filka.

"Or, perhaps, she's in the little wood, alone and crying like she was that time," Filka said to himself.

They parted at the gate.

Kolya ran to the skating-rink. He stumbled down the cliff to the barges, made his way along the snowy path, and stepped out on to a clear edge of ice. The river was unrecognizable. The snow lay in peaceful drifts everywhere, and the mountains gave off an icy sparkle. The spruce garlands swayed no more. They had fallen and been sucked up into the snow as if it were quicksand.

Kolya called Tanya's name once, twice, again and again. But the river was silent and only blinded him with its glitter.

And on the opposite side of the town Filka stood on the edge of the little wood whose bushes had once hidden him, and called Tanya. When he had been there that time, the first snow had been falling. It was so light that you almost thought you could carry it off, and the

wood with it, on the palm of your hand. Now the snow was heavy, pinning the branches of the old spruces to the ground and all but sinking the young birches. But Filka went on shouting, and had his cries and pleas been answered, if only by the echo, he would have thrown himself down under the bushes and wept. But the silence was unbroken, and Filka tramped back out of the wood over the deep snow.

Kolya and he met at the school gate. They crept down to the cloak-room and there, standing in the farthest and dimmest corner, exchanged a look of profound anxiety.

"What are we to do now?" Filka asked.

Suddenly they heard someone sobbing softly in the shadows by the wall where the watchman stacked wood for the stove.

"Tanya!" they cried, hurrying near.

But it was Zhenya, not Tanya. They found her squeezed in between the wall and the stove. Her face was hidden from them and Filka grasped her by the shoulders and turned her round.

"You didn't go off anywhere by yourself, did you?" he asked.

"No-o," Zhenya sobbed.

"What are you crying for then?"

"Perhaps. . ." she brought out, a catch in her voice, "perhaps ... she's dead."

Kolya, who had not said a word, went back to a corner and sat down on the floor, dropping his head on his knees.

Meanwhile, Tanya lay sleeping in an upstairs room where the Pioneers stored their property. They had all forgotten about this room.

She was surrounded by flags and placards. Portraits hung slantwise on the walls looking like birds about to take wing, drums lay about on the window-sill and shining bugles were hooked up on nails.

The property of the Pioneers! A world of sonorous objects looked out at her from every corner.

It was a pity to part with it, even in sleep!

Even in sleep, I say, because seeing Tanya so unhappy and dejected, a soothing slumber crept over her, and she fell fast asleep on the thick sawdust mattress in the corner where she had been sitting all the morning.

But even this kindly sleep could do nothing to stop her imagination.

Tanya dreamt that she was present at a meeting of her Pioneer unit.

In this same room where she lay sleeping so

peacefully her friends were gathered about her. They were seated on drums, on stools, on a wooden horse upholstered with black oilcloth. Their gestures were threatening, their faces grave and their glances seemed trying to pierce her heart. But they trembled and broke before ever they could reach her, like rays cut off abruptly by someone's shielding hand.

"Judge her, and may your judgement be without mercy," an unknown man proclaimed. His clothes and appearance were very odd. His greatcoat flaunted a cape and a shining collar of marten, and his long hair fell about his face, almost hiding it.

"Judge her," he said again, "for she is cruel."

"Yes, she is. Very cruel," Zhenya agreed. "She told them to fry my beautiful goldfish."

"Judge her, for her heart is full of envy."

"Yes, yes, it is," the fat boy echoed. "She is jealous of Kolya, we all know she is. She took him riding in the storm on purpose, she wanted to kill him."

In her dream Tanya lay speechless, not able to form a word on her lips for they had turned to stone.

The man in the cape drew near, and she retreated to the wall. Terror filled her heart, for she saw that it was Gogol, whose portrait hung over the door.

"I'm so unhappy!" Tanya whispered to him. "Will no one help me? I haven't done anything bad."

Her gaze travelled to the window, and she saw huge bright clouds float into the room. As she watched, they turned into tall knights, and the shining beams of light that came from their armour fell to the floor where they became tiny gurgling streams creeping towards her feet.

Tanya gathered up her feet and rose lightly up from the ground.

She flew as people always fly in dreams. No one could overtake her. She left the room and her favourite tree in the yard far behind. How gracefully she flew round its top branches, without brushing against a single leaf!

She walked along a path, the wide world stretching out on all sides.

She climbed a mountain. Blueberry bushes rustled under her feet. The path grew steeper and steeper, rocks and water came rumbling down towards her.

She reached the summit, and there before her was a forest, running far down the slope. It was a strange forest. She had never seen anything like it before. Its stubby trees were covered with white blossoms and their branches spread low over the ground. Petals, coloured a tender pink by the sun, spun through the quiet air.

Tanya was delighted.

"What is it?" she asked, and the rocks and water rumbled back the answer:

"Orchards in bloom, Tanya."

"But where are the firs?" she asked. "I can't see them anywhere."

But the forest had vanished.

Tanya walked on, this time along a straight, unsloping road without rocks, and stopped on the edge of a field of rye. The familiar shadows of eagles drifted across it, and it heaved up and down like the sky when you see it from aboard a pitching boat. The ears of rye rustled as they rubbed against each other.

"How beautiful! What is it?" Tanya asked with beating heart.

"This is ripening corn," the field murmured.

"How lovely," Tanya whispered soundlessly. "Or is this all a dream? Yes, it is! Of course, it is. I'm asleep. We live so far away."

Abruptly a shadow fell over the sun, and Tanya saw black shreds of cloud, framed in wisps of fog, rushing madly over the field towards her. Hair-thin threads of lightning, uncanny and strange, cut across the rippling rye. Tanya sank to her knees in terror. A long peal of thunder rolled over the sky, from end to end.

Her dream was over, but Tanya did not wake, and the thunder crashed on.

A little girl stood in the corridor outside the store-room door, beating on the drum that hung round her neck, her gaze fastened on the two prancing sticks in her hands. She was practising.

The thunder crashed, echoing through the corridor, and as if in answer to its summons, the children came up the stairs, Kolya first, with Filka, Zhenya and the heavy-stepping fat boy behind him. In their wake came Kostya, the Pioneer leader, and Alexandra Ivanovna, talking in low tones that, unlike the drum, woke no echo beneath the ceiling.

Kolya halted at the door and waited for the others.

"This room's empty," he said, "we can hold our meeting here."

He pushed open the door and walked in without looking round the room. But though he

was not looking for Tanya with his eyes he sought her with his brain and his heart, for his thoughts always turned to her.

He had not expected to find her there, and he stopped short when he saw her lying asleep on the thick mattress that they used as a mat for high jumping.

He parted his lips to call her, but no sound came. He dropped down on his heels at her side to touch her shoulder, but did not touch it. She was fast asleep, and her lashes were still wet with tears.

He turned to the others with a warning wave of his hand. They stopped, looking at Tanya.

"Let her sleep. Don't touch her anyone," Zhenya whispered.

Zhenya was not really mean in her heart of hearts, although her "I told you so's" had more than once made Tanya cry.

"Can't we hold our meeting without her?" she asked. "We know what happened now that Kolya's told us everything."

Alexandra Ivanovna stood thinking a moment. She scanned their faces and, seeing that the impulse had been a generous one, covered her lips with her hand to hide an involuntary smile.

"I think we can," she said. "And I'm sure Kostya will agree with me."

Kostya looked at his charges. They all obviously shared the wish to spare Tanya any more heartache.

"Discipline comes first," he said, "but this is a special case, and we can make an exception. We can take any decision as long as you all agree."

Kolya beckoned to Filka.

"Do something for me, will you?" he said. "Go and tell that girl I'll kill her if she doesn't stop her drumming."

Filka nodded and went out of the room. He struck the young drummer a blow between her shoulder-blades, a light blow, to be sure, but one that sent her knees buckling under her just the same.

"Someone's lying there asleep," Filka told her, "and you make enough noise to rouse the whole world! Haven't you got any shame? Not even the bit little girls like you are supposed to have?"

And then they all marched off in single file, trying to step as softly as possible, and the little girl with the drum brought up the rear, her drumsticks poised in the air.

XIX

Tanya woke up after the children had gone, and went home alone, the rosy evening sky escorting her to the door of her house. The fresh air cleared her head, and took the weight off her shoulders, but it did not relieve her aching conscience.

How could she tell her mother what had happened without distressing her?

But her mother was out, and for the first time this made Tanya angry with her.

She did not ask Nanny for tea or supper but lay down on her bed in her shoes and dress, something her mother would never have permitted.

"So what! I don't care," Tanya told herself. "I haven't done anything wrong. It's not my fault things turned out so badly, that I have no sisters or brothers, that I'm to be punished for something I didn't do, that Nanny is too old and there's no one in the whole house to talk to. Why am I always alone, always by myself? It's all Mother's fault. Why did Father leave her? There must have been a reason for it."

Tanya lay in the darkness a long time without switching on the light till at last her eyes closed and she fell asleep. Sleep took her una-

wares. She had meant to stay awake and be ready to jump up at once at the first sound of her mother's footsteps or her voice.

Someone shook her shoulder, and Tanya stirred. The light had been switched on, but she did not immediately wake up. Among the dim forms and shapes she saw through her sleepy eyes, she noticed her mother bending over her. Her mother's face was blurred, as if shadowed, and expressed a vague uneasiness. Her gaze was fixed and stern, and to Tanya it suddenly seemed as if her mother had lifted her arm to strike her.

She gave a cry and sat up.

Her mother frowned.

"Why did you lie down with your clothes on?" she demanded. "I always tell you not to. Get up now."

But her mind was not on her daughter's small breach of discipline, and Tanya was quick to perceive it.

"Get up," her mother repeated, "get up and have some tea. I've been to see your head master. He asked me to come to see him. Get up, I want to talk to you about something."

But Tanya did not stir and sat clutching the side of the wooden bed.

Her mother sat down beside her.

She touched Tanya's arm gently, and the touch told Tanya that her mother was deeply distressed.

"What's this I hear about you? How did it all happen?" her mother asked.

"It's not true," Tanya replied. "Did you really believe what they said?"

Tanya's voice was hoarse and as if muffled. She had not said two dozen words the whole day.

"I did not believe it, nor did anyone else except Aristarkh Aristarkhovich. He even demanded that you should be expelled."

"Why?" Tanya asked tonelessly.

"He made himself ridiculous, really," her mother said. "He said something about people like you being a bad influence. Yes, he was quite absurd," and she smiled faintly.

But Tanya did not smile.

"You have many friends, and that's a good thing," her mother went on. "Alexandra Ivanovna is one of them and so is the head master. He's a kind and clever man, although he was quite angry with your father."

"Was Father there too?" Tanya asked, startled.

"Yes."

The mother dropped her eyes. Her face looked pinched.

"I'm not so upset about this story that got into the newspaper," she said softly. "I'm upset about you. You tell me nothing about yourself. I learn it all from other people. Strangers told me about Kolya and about your very strange conduct. I never knew the children had nicknamed you 'dingo.' You've been so silent lately, so reserved. Are you afraid of me? Don't you love me? Answer me."

Tanya moved her head. She found it difficult to speak.

"I'm always alone, I'm always by myself," she said at last, adding in tones that were barely audible: "Why did Father leave us? Tell me. Whose fault was it?"

Her mother did not reply at once, and Tanya could not bring herself to look at her.

The silence lasted a minute, two minutes, perhaps more. Then her mother began to speak in a calm and steady voice.

"People live together because they love each other, Tanya," she said, "and if love goes, they are free to part. That's how things are and how they always will be."

She stopped, and Tanya ventured to look at her, cautiously at first, bending her head and

glancing up like a little bird making sure that no danger lurked overhead before it flew away.

The mother sat without moving, holding her head high. But her face wore an agonized look, as if she were enduring some dreadful torture, as if someone were flaying her with rods or, perhaps, with words.

"Who is torturing her so?" thought Tanya as she scrutinized her mother's face, and pain flooded her heart.

The most beautiful eyes in the world looked at her from her mother's face, eyes brimming with tears that shone under the lashes and in the corners of the dark lids.

"Perhaps we had better leave the town, Tanya?" her mother suggested.

Tanya's hand flew to her breast.

"Mother!" she cried with amazement and a deep pity. "Mother! You still love him!"

She flung her arm around her mother's neck and pressed a hot, flushed cheek to her hair, her warm breath coming and going in waves.

"Mother, don't listen to me, don't listen to me, darling! I don't understand anything any more. Everything is going round and round, I'm dizzy. . . ."

For Tanya had a sudden feeling that the whole world was spinning and whirling round

her head. It was strange, almost uncanny, and it reminded her of the balloon about which young Maxim sings in the film:

Up flies my daring balloon to the sky,
It spins and it turns and it dances on high ...

The balloon—it was dusky one moment, as dusky and pallid as the mists of evening, only to become as bright as a sunlit river the next, or as the orchard she had seen in her dream.

It spins and it turns and is ready to drop....

"Don't let's go away, Mother, please," Tanya whispered, her tears mingling with her mother's.

XX

"There are all kinds of love," Zhenya declared.

She and Tanya were sitting in her room by the window, on which stood the large aquarium filled with fresh water.

They were at loggerheads no longer. They stared through the glass and the water at a distorted image of spring in the street outside. The huge sun drifted lazily past the window,

and the specks of dust that danced on the tips of its slender beams like accomplished rope-walkers, broke up into tiny sparkling diamonds every time one of the little captive fishes in the tank swished its tail.

The old tin-smith shouted and beat on his metal bar, and Tanya felt that it was he who had brought spring to town on his back.

"Have you ever been in love?" Tanya asked her friend.

"Oh, yes, only it was long ago, when I was in the third form."

"How did you know it was love?"

"Nothing easier. He'd say: 'Zhenya, let me copy your arithmetic exercise,' and I'd say to myself: 'No, I won't,' I knew it was wrong to let him. But then he'd say: 'Please, Zhenya, I won't tease you any more.' So I let him do it. I couldn't help it, I couldn't go against my heart. But it passed, I put an end to it myself. I saw that I was beginning to get poor marks at school and I decided I'd had enough!"

"How did you put an end to it?" Tanya asked her curiously.

"Oh, it was easy! I simply stopped looking at him. I kept my eyes off him for a whole day, and then another one, and so on until I quite forgot him."

Tanya sat up straight, her gaze lingering for a moment on the water in the aquarium. Then she gave her friend an unsmiling look. With all her heart she envied her her round cheeks and her sober head that was packed with such surprising ideas. Her lips formed for a sigh, but a low whistle emerged instead.

"Don't whistle in the house," Zhenya said. "It brings bad luck."

Tanya held her breath. She was in a house where Turkish caps bloomed in winter and goldfish lived in a grove of water-plants.

There was a silence.

"You're right, it's true," Tanya said after a pause. "There are all kinds of love." And without adding another word, she got up and left.

Outside, the old tin-smith was still jangling his metalwares at the cross-roads. Spring had come to stay. In the little wood behind Tanya's house it had brought out the grass round the marble-like birches and covered the roots of the blue firs with a blanket of fresh moss. The firs waved their shaggy branches, flirting with the warm wind.

Tanya called to Filka who at once shouted back in reply. He was sitting in a tree, dangling his bare feet and sharpening a pencil

with his hunting-knife. On his knees lay a pile of books and notebooks, a heavy burden that weighed down his brain, swayed the tree-tops and seemed to send the whole forest around him rocking and reeling.

Filka worked hard at school.

Tanya and he had been inseparable ever since that dramatic day on the river. They even did their schoolwork together, both profiting from Tanya's alert memory.

Tanya caught hold of a thick bough, jumped and swung herself up among the branches.

This was a Daurian birch, almost entirely leafless, and crooked. It was so comfortable to sit in it side by side with Filka.

"The last exam's tomorrow, and you walk off for a whole hour," said Filka reproachfully. "Just because you know everything you don't care if another chap fails or not. And he will fail. I know he will. Of course," he added bitterly, "it would be different if he spent more time learning. You're never there when he needs you most."

"But, Filka," Tanya said, "you could have learned that theorem while I was at Zhenya's."

"I tried," Filka sadly rejoined, "but it's no good. It rolls away from me as if it were on wheels."

"Let's get down to work then," said Tanya, reaching for her notebook.

"If two circles have a common point..." she began, watching the wind flutter the birch leaves.

But Filka went on sharpening his pencil, and his hunting-knife flashed in the sun like a wood pigeon's wing.

"No, wait," he said, "tell me something first. Are you really going to the promontory with Kolya at daybreak?"

"Yes, I told you I was."

"And is that why you've put on your best dress and go climbing trees in it without caring what happens?"

"Yes."

"And if Kolya is scared and doesn't turn up?"

"He'll turn up," said Tanya, her gaze still fastened on the leaves.

"And if your father finds out?"

"He won't."

"Aren't you afraid someone will tell him?"

Tanya shrugged.

"No one knows except you, and you won't tell him." And she glanced suspiciously at Filka to make sure he wasn't making fun of her.

But Filka had never been so serious in his life.

"I know the place," he said thoughtfully. "The pheasants feed there at dawn. That's the best time to get them. . . . But you shouldn't go, you're only a girl."

"I'm going." And her tone was such that Filka knew she would not change her mind.

He had already said everything he could think of to stop her, and there was nothing else to be done. He looked at her silently, watching the sun set her face, arms and dress aglow.

"I wasted my breath trying to talk her out of it," he thought. "She's not afraid of anything."

But looking up at her, he saw her eyes glaze with sudden fear, and he drew back in alarm.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"A caterpillar!" Tanya cried.

She drew her dress away from her neck, twisting it in a tight knot and saying over and over again in a terrified voice: "A caterpillar! A caterpillar! It's in there! Ugh, it makes me sick. Cut it off!"

Filka hesitated for the fraction of a second, looking at his knife. It was as sharp as an awl and he had used it often to procure "ant juice" and resin and other delicacies for Tanya.

Then, suddenly, he threw out his hand, and

the knife flashed out, snipping off a good piece of Tanya's dress.

Feeling nothing for the moment but fear and revulsion, Tanya still clutched the shorn piece of fabric in her hand. Then she unfolded it slowly. Instead of the formidable caterpillar there lay in her hand an ordinary twig.

The fear on Tanya's face changed to bewilderment and then to despair when she saw the huge hole on her dress. She dropped her hands.

"What ever can I wear now? Why did you do it, Filka?"

"You asked me to. But I did it on purpose, really," he said. "You won't go with Kolya now, will you?"

"Yes, I will. I'll go just the same!" Tanya cried, and leaping down from the tree, she plunged into the thicket, vanishing out of sight amid the black-and-white birches. It was as if a whirlwind had swept her away.

Filka was left alone in the tree, and the geometry book that had been lying in his lap fell down into the grass. A striped chipmunk, the most curious of the wood dwellers, stole up to it and stopped short. In its forepaws it held a nut, a trophy it was taking to its hole under the roots of the birch. Crossly, Filka flung his knife at the chipmunk, its keen blade cleaving

the ground in front of the little animal's very nose. The chipmunk dropped its nut and vanished as suddenly as Tanya had done.

Filka crawled slowly down from the tree. He picked up the nut and weighed it in his hand. It was whole, with the kernel in it intact. For a few moments he stared at it without moving, his thoughts on Tanya. Then, deciding that no nut should be left uncracked, he closed his teeth noisily over it.

XXI

The town slept, and although at night every sound, however distant, becomes clear, the silence was unbroken and the streets empty. Only Tanya had ventured out.

She had been out once before at this time of night and had walked along the same road. But then Filka had been beside her, carrying her fishing-rod over his shoulder. They had both shivered with the cold, for the autumn night had been chilly, the leaves whipping off the trees and chasing the wind without touching the ground. The stars had only flickered on the very edge of the horizon. Now they clustered in the sky and waited for day-

break before fading out. Guided by their soft light, Tanya made her way alone to the woody promontory.

Entering the forest, she walked along a wide path where it was lighter than under the trees. Long roots and shadows crossed her way. But she felt no fear, and was only startled when moist alder leaves brushed against her face. She would draw them aside absently with her hand and walk on, deeply engrossed in her thoughts.

What should she do if Kolya told her he loved her? He had come to her the other day and invited her to this rendezvous, saying: "Please come. You must. For my sake. I've never really seen the sunrise in the forest yet. Please, please come."

Well, she had done as he had wished, she would be at the appointed place in another moment. But what should she do? What do people do when someone tells them he loves them? And especially if you have a mother who has no one but you, whose whole life is wrapped up in you?

Tanya shivered, wrapping herself up closer in her mother's white doctor's smock that she had put on without her knowledge. The forest

made way before her, leading her along its paths to the rocky promontory.

Kolya sat on one of the huge boulders and waited, his gaze fastened on the forest. The white sand gleamed beneath the fading stars, and the rocks shone as if they had been washed by rain.

He was taken unawares by Tanya's sudden appearance. He did not know her in her white smock and started to run away from her. But she called to him, and he came back sheepishly. He was embarrassed.

Time wore slowly on. In perfect silence, the two of them walked back to the edge of the forest where the pointed spruces stood coated in fog like spindles wrapped in yarn.

They stopped under a broad-branched larch.

"Why are you wearing that smock?" Kolya asked.

"Because I can't wear the dress you liked any more. It's ruined."

"What on earth does it matter! I don't care about your dresses. It's you I think about."

"Always?"

"Always. Even when you're not there. That's what's so strange."

"Yes, it is strange," Tanya agreed.

They sat down at the foot of the larch and

listened to the branches cracking overhead—the birds were waking up. A nutcracker flapped its wings over the top of a neighbouring spruce and flew away, leaving a dim trail behind it in the dark air.

"That bird spent a long night on the spruce," Tanya said, watching its flight, "and then it flew away.... But I'm glad you think about me. It means you'll think about me always, doesn't it, even when I'm not here any more? I'm going away soon, you know."

Kolya gave a little cry. He could not restrain it, for Tanya's words seared his heart.

"Do you want to go away then?" he asked.

Tanya tried hard to keep her voice steady.

"Yes. I think it'll be for the best. Father can stay here with you and Nadya. She's nice too, and he loves her. But I'll never leave mother, and we have to go away."

"But why? Do you still hate me?"

"No! No! Don't say another word about it," Tanya said tonelessly. "I don't know what made me behave as I did when you first came. I was so frightened. Father is *my* father, not yours. And perhaps that was why I was so unfair to you. I hated and feared you. But now I want you to be happy, Kolya...."

"No, no!" he broke out excitedly, interrupt-

ing her. "I want you to be happy too, and your mother and father and Aunt Nadya. I want everyone to be happy. Why can't we all be happy?"

"Perhaps we can," Tanya said thoughtfully, "I don't know."

She fell silent, thinking about her own happiness and the happiness of her mother and father.

She sat quietly, her back against the larch-tree's broad trunk, as if drawing comfort and support from its solidity, something that the vague thoughts crowding in her brain could not give her.

But the larch too trembled a little in the night wind that blew in gusts from the river and swayed the tree-tops as it swept fiercely through the forest.

Dawn came rolling behind it like a rising tide crashing against the forest wall.

All the stars had disappeared from the sky above the river.

"I want everyone to be happy too," said Tanya, gazing fixedly into the distance where the sun rose hazily over the water. "And now I'd better be going. The sun's already risen. Good-bye, Kolya."

She got up and, turning her back on the river, began to walk through the forest without bothering to find the road.

Kolya caught up with her on a path bordered by spruces and cedars.

"Don't go, Tanya!" he cried. "Don't go! You haven't said all you have to say. That wasn't all, was it?"

"Yes, it was," she replied, feigning surprise. "Is there something else you want to know, Kolya?"

Afraid to blush if he looked at her tenderly, he dropped his eyes, and she went on gazing at him, searching his face sweetly and gently.

He bent down and brushed her cheek with his lips.

She did not move away.

The silence enveloped them.

It was broken suddenly by two rifle-shots that rang out in the forest and were echoed in the mountains.

A spasm passed over the branches of a small cedar near by, and a large green-and-gold pheasant dropped at their feet.

They started away in fright.

The pheasant struggled in the grass and then lay still; and a second pheasant, a white-

eared one, zigzagged through the air and plopped down dead near Tanya.

From behind some thick spruces Tanya's father stepped out on to the path, followed by Filka.

They each carried a gun, and a wisp of blue smoke coiled up over their heads amid the trees.

"Wonderful!" her father said.

Tanya rushed to him.

He showed no surprise at seeing her there, in the forest.

Passing his arm through hers affectionately, he said:

"Time to go home, children. You don't want to miss your last examination."

Filka picked up the heavy birds and, hoisting them and his gun over his shoulder, went to meet Kolya.

"We've been hunting," he said. "Many pheasants come here to feed at dawn."

Kolya was trembling from head to foot. Filka took off his jacket and threw it over his shoulders. He slipped his arm through his friend's, but the path was too narrow for the two of them to walk side by side and they had to go in single file.

Tanya and her father led the way, Tanya

snuggling close to him to avoid brushing the dew from the trees with her shoulder.

Now and then she would lift up her eyes and look into his face.

He strode straight along the path, heedless of the dew, his heels crashing down on the roots underfoot. He did not stumble.

He was a simple man. He smiled at her and held her firmly.

"You look so much like your mother in that white smock!" he said.

Tanya took his hand suddenly, drawing it on to her shoulder just where he had placed it on the first day they had met. She stroked and kissed it.

"Daddy," she said, "darling Daddy, forgive me. I was angry with you before, but now I understand everything. It's no one's fault, neither mine, nor yours, nor Mother's. There are many, very many people in the world who are worthy of love, aren't there?"

"Yes," he said.

"Can you ever forgive me for behaving so badly? I'll never, never be so unkind any more." She added softly: "Are you cross at me for being out here in the forest with Kolya so early?"

"Oh, no, my darling. I know how wonderful the forest can be at dawn!"

XXII

Spring had gone. The river became shallow, baring the rocks along the banks, and long before noon the sand grew warm from the hot sun.

The shimmering glitter over the river grew sharper, more dazzling.

The blaze of summer invaded the mountains, and eagles sailed slowly up into the heights on currents of hot air. Sometimes a fresh breeze blew from the sea and the forests rustled in response.

Tanya was making a last, farewell round of the shore. Flanked by her shadow, she walked along the sandy beach, the river running doggedly beside her like a friend seeing her off on her journey.

A long sandy spit barred their way.

Tanya stopped. She used to go there with Filka for a morning dip. Where could Filka be? She had spent the morning searching for him. He had run away, she knew, to avoid saying good-bye to her, and was nowhere to be found.

But she had only herself to blame.

How often during the past eventful year had she neglected Filka! And she had once promised never to change him for anyone. He was the most generous of friends, always loyal, never forgetful.

Now that she was about to go away from the home that was so dear to her heart, Tanya thought of him with gratitude and was determined to find him.

"Filka! Filka!" she called loudly, the wind carrying her voice to the spit's very edge. Suddenly, from beyond the sandbank, Filka emerged, standing up on his knees by the water.

Tanya ran to him, plunging her feet in the sand.

"Mother's waiting for me at the quay, Filka," she said reproachfully, "and I've spent my time searching for you since early this morning. What are you doing here?"

"Oh, nothing much," Filka replied, adding in a Nanai turn of speech: "Little-little lie around."

His voice was low and his eyes were narrow slits, and Tanya smiled seeing him looking so mournful.

"Little-little," she repeated with a laugh, but broke short as she looked at him again.

He was naked to the waist, and in the sparkling sunlight, his shoulders were as brown and shiny as the rocks by the river. On his sun-tanned chest five white letters stood out sharply.

"T A N Y A," she read.

Filka's hand flew to his chest in embarrassment, and he drew back several steps. Had not the river cut off his retreat, he would have gone much farther.

Tanya moved towards him, the distance between them diminishing step by step.

"Wait, Filka, wait!" she said.

He stopped.

"Oh, well," he told himself, "if two people can part so easily, it doesn't matter who sees this."

But Tanya did not look at him.

She glanced at the sun, at the dazzling light over the mountains, and she turned Filka's hands palms up. They were empty.

She was amazed.

"How did you do it?" she asked.

Silently Filka bent down to the pile of clothing on the sand and produced five letters cut out of white paper. Laying them against his chest, he said:

"I come here every morning and take a sun-

bath with the letters on my chest so that your name will stay white. Just an idea of mine. But I wish you wouldn't laugh at me."

He laid his hand against his throat which was a sign with him of extreme melancholy, and Tanya knew that she must not laugh.

With a tenderness new to her she looked into his eyes and touched his chest with her finger.

"What a child you are still, Filka! That sunburn'll wear off and the letters will vanish as soon as winter comes and you change into your warm things."

Filka frowned, his bewildered gaze travelling over the sand and the river that twisted beneath the mountains like a sparkling golden valley. He was terribly confused. He had forgotten all about winter, had never given it a thought.

"What a fool I am!"

He was disgusted with himself, but would not readily admit it.

"The sun's very strong," he said stubbornly. "Some trace of the letters is sure to be left, isn't it, Tanya?"

Tanya considered this a moment.

"Yes," she said to comfort him. "Some trace is sure to be left. It can't all vanish." Her eyes smarting with sudden tears, she added: "Where

would we be if it did? What would a friendship like ours be worth?"

They flung their arms round each other.

The warm air caressed their faces, and solitary birds gazed down at them from the sky above.

Their childhood was over! And who could tell them how it had vanished? Neither the sand, nor the forest, nor again the rocks that were with them always; no, not even the river winding swiftly amid the dark mountains towards the rising sun. In that dim distance, endless new vistas loomed up before them, a bright land of magic.

Arm in arm they stood gazing ahead. They never turned their heads to look back, for they were too young for memories.

But already their hearts were troubled by the first sadness of parting.

"Good-bye, Dingo," said Filka, "good-bye!"

He wanted to cry bitterly, but he was a boy born in a silent forest on the shores of a grim sea. He flung himself out on the sand by the water and lay without stirring.

And Tanya walked on along the sandy riverbank, the keen sea wind blowing in her face.

TO THE READER

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